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REALISM AND IDEALISM  
IN THE  
POLITICAL THOUGHT  
OF  
REINHOLD NIEBUHR

Submitted to the Department of Economics and Political  
Science of the University of Windsor in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

by

Robert Keith Ward B.A.

Faculty of Graduate Studies

1966

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## ABSTRACT

If the purpose of this thesis is to offer new insight into the political thought of Reinhold Niebuhr, it will be seen that the analysis must proceed in three stages. Initially, the problem will be to establish in theory some scheme by which meaning can, in some degree, be brought to all political systems, and through which certain fundamental characteristics, found in some systems but not in others, may be permitted to emerge. This will involve the setting up of two extreme positions. The second problem will entail of course, clarifying exactly what Reinhold Niebuhr's political thought is. Coincident with, although logically distinguishable from, this, is the third problem -- the task of applying the established scheme to that particular political thought.

The two extreme positions will be called Political Realism and Political Idealism, both of which are common terms in political parlance. Unfortunately however, it is the case that neither of these concepts is susceptible to clear and brief definition, and as such, neither has heretofore been capable of anything more than roughly indicating general predispositions, and at times, fitting the biases of the person that wields them. Accordingly, it will be necessary to ground both these labels in terms which neither equivocate nor beg the question.

But while dealing with what are admittedly two "ideal" types, it must be kept in mind that to demonstrate relevance in any particular case, is not to prove thereby that this scheme has the final word. Insofar as it is the purpose of this thesis to explain Niebuhr in these terms, it will be argued that to understand Niebuhr's thought is to be aware of the way in which he combines elements of both schools. But insofar as a proper perspective of the truth inhering in one's own cause must be maintained, it will be observed, even if it is only as an aside, that Niebuhr cannot ultimately be contained by the terms of this categorization.

## PREFACE

The French, it is said, and especially French academics, have a genius for complex order. That is to say, they seem to take a positive delight in making a theoretical muchness out of any simple assertion, and verge on ecstasy before the prospect of working an intricate balance and form into the presentation of that simple assertion. They pale visibly at the mention of what is generally known as muddled English pragmatism, and certainly, if the Germans gave birth to the dialectic, the French adopted it and raised it as their own. Anyone who has had the opportunity of sitting an exam composed by a native-born French scholar will testify to the necessity of approaching every problem in the following manner: 1) place the statement, question, or problem in its historical context or background; 2) state the thesis; 3) state the antithesis; and 4) state the synthesis. Of course the pattern may vary in its richness occasionally -- the reasoning being that if one dialectical progression is good, two are better. Thus from time to time one may be called upon to state the thesis and antithesis of the original thesis and antithesis.

All this is understandably confusing to the "English" mind, whatever that is, and may require a brief explanation. Without doubt, this singular obsession with complex order is due as much to a demand on the part of the "French" mind for

both intellectual rigour and esthetic appeal in the presentation of an idea, as it is to the fact that the academic world in general is universally renowned for the absence of a sense of the ridiculous. Moreover, it is a commonly held assumption among both academics and Frenchmen that effective thought (not to say thesis-writing) consists in the art of imposing a credible order on ordinary reality, thereby eliciting some perception of an order in reality. These are things one learns to live with.

But what has all this to do with a preface to a thesis ostensibly concerned with political science? The reader may very well ask. It is clear even to the author that the connection between the following presentation of the political thought of Reinhold Niebuhr and the folkways of an entire nation, not to mention those of a minority group, are tenuous at best. Yet what other purpose can a preface serve than that it prepare the reader for what is to follow? Thus the reader is hereby advised that the author received his undergraduate training at the hands of a group of emigré French scholars; that their handiwork has only too well borne fruit; that the above-outlined scheme has been assiduously followed in the body of this thesis; and that a synthesis has been wrought between an undergraduate thesis written in 1964 (in, to, and about the French genius) and a master's thesis written in 1966. This is surely the first instance on record of a synthesis of two theses.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I should like to express my gratitude foremost to my patient advisor and friend, Dr. E.D. Briggs, who literally conceived this thesis, inspired the labour, and fortunately attended the delivery. It is only to be regretted that the richness of the topic's potentialities did not dawn on the author as soon as it did on Dr. Briggs whose foresight must be commended. I am also deeply grateful to Dr. V. Chrypinski and Dr. R. Nelson for their careful reading of the following and for their many suggestions for its improvement. I must add that I have no expert competence in either the fields of philosophy or theology and I must apologize in advance to the specialists in these areas for what are undoubtedly many errors of fact and judgment. Naturally, none of the above-mentioned members of my thesis committee should be held responsible for these errors or for defects in the basic theme.

Special thanks is due to Mr. Robert Garen of the Library staff who devoted much time and energy beyond the call of duty in his efforts to secure various articles long out of print. Finally, I should also like to thank both the Department for its financial support in making available sources of information which would otherwise have been denied to me, and Mrs. Cunningham who had to read my typing.

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## CHAPTER I

### POLITICAL IDEALISM VS POLITICAL REALISM

The reasonable man adapts himself to the world; the unreasonable one persists in trying to adapt the world to himself. Therefore all progress depends on the unreasonable man.

SHAW, Maxims for Revolutionists, page 238.

Classification is the refuge of the sluggish mind.

It is a pedagogic device that has only one end in mind - that of the facilitation of learning through simplification, which in turn means the pursuit of essentials and the discarding of the superfluous. This of course necessitates choice. All rational thought inherently involves this process of systematization, and indeed for that thought to be communicable to others in terms of logic, it must do so. Both student and teacher are forced to search for Order in a Universe which will remain unmoved by any human attempts to subject it to such a restriction.

The most readily comprehensible classification is that of the simple thesis and antithesis. Grouping all phenomena with reference to their opposites, positive and negative, is the ultimate in intellectual neatness and has found no more inspired a champion than the American philosopher William James.

As E.H. Carr observes,<sup>1</sup> beside such a system of paired opposites as Rationalist-Empiricist, Intellectualist-Sensationalist, Idealist-Materialist, Optimist-Pessimist, Religious-Irreligious, Monist-Pluralist, Voluntarist-Fatalist, and Dogmatist-Sceptic, even Hegel's triadic dialectic must appear heavily encumbered and awkward. Moreover, apart from mundane considerations of comprehensibility, the esthetic appeal of such pure artistic form cannot be gainsaid. It is unfortunate that while two points do make a straight line (or a comparison), it however takes a third point to give it meaning.

Having thus made all the proper academic reservations pertaining to the artificial and subjective nature of "classification" per se, it is now permissible to proceed directly to the purpose of this introductory chapter, which is: to define that basic distinction between Realism and Idealism which informs all differing political systems, and in the process, to ascertain in what way this distinction diverges, if indeed it does, from others offered to a similar end.

Such traditional contrasts as democratic vs. aristocratic, individualistic vs. collectivistic, or liberal vs. conservative are by now quite familiar if for no other reason than that each in a modified but recognizable form, has enjoyed its brief moment on the stage of history. At such periods each theory reflected the power ambitions of particular social groupings or classes and each articulated a specific

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<sup>1</sup>E.H. Carr, The Twenty Years' Crisis, New York, 1964, p.12.



concept of the nature of man and his relations to the community. And in turn each claimed to justify itself in terms of such equally vague concepts as "justice", "liberty", "equality", "order", "good government" or "pursuit of happiness".

Whether one attempts to distinguish between political theories on the basis of these aforementioned ultimate justifications, or for instance, merely on one particular aspect of the "exercise of authority", will depend in the final analysis on the degree to which the observer wishes to be 'purely' or 'exclusively' political. If politics is the "master science" it is because the study of a political system may take one of many diverse courses suitable to the respective talents of the philosopher and the economist, or the theologian and the sociologist, and still be legitimately considered a political study. It is possible, however, to be uniquely political in a narrower sense by confining the examination to the exercise of power, the consideration of which belongs less properly to any other field. By using such a narrow criterion, it is thus possible to distinguish between political theories on a 'purely' political ground, but there is no inherent reason why using such an 'exclusively' political criterion should be preferable to any other.

Just as no single view of distinguishing and classifying political systems can be considered superior to all others by virtue of its "political-ness", so no one criterion can be held to fill the role of "all-inclusive distinction"

better than all others. This warning cannot be emphasized too strongly. While most antithetical categories may be of great use in examining many theories of politics from a particular point of view, it must be seriously questioned whether these same distinctions can be anything more than equally artificial and arbitrary when applied to the whole of political thought. It will be seen that exactly how useful any given scheme is, depends on one's purposes. Hopefully this criterion of conscious aim will be applied to the one upon which this thesis is built.

Taken as a whole, no political theory can be said to be "true". It contains among its component parts certain judgments of fact, estimates of probability, concepts of the 'good', the 'real', the 'rational', and ways of knowing them. While these elements, in combination, may be judged "logically consistent" in their mutual interrelation and while they may be deemed to provide "useful insights" into political phenomena, invariably they include evaluations and preferences which will distort the perception of fact, will shape the estimates of probability, and will determine the aforementioned concepts. Similarly, there exist no independent criteria for demonstrating that any political theory is "false", either in its whole or in its parts. Despite this, there exists a distinction between fact and value which theoretically stands to be applied to all thought. It is precisely when this application is attempted, that the relationship between the two becomes less clearly defined than the contrast in theory would make

it appear. It is not that the meaning of the two concepts is ambiguous in their mutual tension, but simply that any assertion involving their use begs a prior question of the nature of reality and knowledge.

Positing then in theory, two worlds -- the empirical world of fact and the ideal world of 'rational' value -- the basic question concerns the relationship between the two. Any statement on this relationship betrays a prior ontological and epistemological commitment whether it is claimed that in 'reality' the distinction ceases to exist or otherwise. No political theorist can escape the responsibility of making a judgment explicitly or implicitly on this relationship, although admittedly a mere statistician of contemporary political behaviour may limit the extent of such judgments to fundamental methodology. This fact alone suggests that it is possible to make an extended classification of all political systems in terms of these judgments.

Apart from whether it is or is not possible to make such a distinction, the overriding concern must involve the value of doing so. It would not be difficult to devise any number of dividing lines whose sole merit would consist in the fact that they cover the entire length of political thought, were it not necessary to demonstrate as well that the result is fruitful in terms of academic inquiry. While grouping all political theorists according to whether they reasoned inductively or deductively might have relevance to an historic debate over conceptual framework, since no consistent relation-

ship can be established between 'method' and any other universal criterion, the research would ultimately be found to be sterile. For example, Plato, Rousseau, and Hobbes used a deductive method in constructing their theories while Aristotle and Machiavelli employed inductive procedures and John Stuart Mill combined both. It is thus necessary to demonstrate that any distinction in general, and in particular, the one herein presented which is based on differing concepts of the relationship in history between the empirical world and the rational ideal, reveals fundamental antagonisms which may never be resolved, and explains predispositions in issues of the highest importance.<sup>2</sup> The extent to which these requirements are met may be better judged when the criteria are explained in detail.

Derived from this original distinction between fact and value, this "dividing-line" to be herein presented, may be summed up in differing concepts of the "possible". Herein two broad schools of thought emerge. The labels which will be used for these schools are Realism and Idealism, although the reader is advised that the meanings which will be assigned to

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<sup>2</sup>The word 'predispositions' is used here for want of any better objective term. Admittedly one could go overboard in this objectivity in the manner of Bertrand Russell who is reported as saying during the last war, that he personally had no quarrel with Hitler's philosophy although he objected to it on purely esthetic grounds. The 'issues of the highest importance' refers not to debates over which type of government produces what type of system, but to such arguments over hierarchies of values such as whether Order or Freedom or Justice should be the conscious end of political action.

these words may not conform fully to accepted usage, nor necessarily to that of Niebuhr himself.

Fundamental as this is maintained to be, it is by no means a simple task to define accurately and yet concisely exactly what is meant by these terms. Although philosophical and theological definitions abound, it is clear that to make use of them would make this a thesis on metaphysics. To the knowledge of the author, a political definition qua definition has not existed until recently and most latter-day "Realists" like Hans J. Morgenthau have been content to make extended descriptions.<sup>3</sup> Even the usually-reliable political dictionaries seem unwilling to do more than list common usages, observe that these should not be confused with the metaphysical meanings they might otherwise have, and suggest referring to the collected works of a few individuals who consider themselves members of one group or another.<sup>4</sup>

However in 1951, John H. Herz attempted just such a definition by positing the reality of what he calls the "security and power" dilemma and then examining the extent to which various theories recognize this reality.<sup>5</sup> However by

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<sup>3</sup>See Wm. T. Bluhm, Theories of the Political System, New York, 1965, p. 179; and Morgenthau's introduction to his own book Politics Among Nations, New York, 1962, pp. 3-15.

<sup>4</sup>The best dictionary to appear in recent years is Joseph Dunner's Dictionary of Political Science, (Philosophical Library), New York, 1964, yet even this otherwise superb volume limits itself to the above observations.

<sup>5</sup>John H. Herz, Political Realism and Political Idealism, Chicago, 1964, pp. 18-19. Herz defines Realism in the following manner: " (It) ... characterizes that type of political

adhering to a certain position with regard to the nature of the real world, Herz limited his definition unnecessarily and thereby failed to find the objective criterion he sought. The nucleus of his definitions, on the other hand, represents a valuable contribution to any understanding of the terms, for it advances the novel idea that the relationship between the empirical order as he understood it and the ideal order as anyone might choose to paint it, was and is a key which would illuminate features common to seemingly dissimilar theorists. From this argument that certain thinkers are joined by a common bond and are to be distinguished from another group of thinkers in terms of each's understanding of this relationship, arises Herz's conviction that the typology of political thought and behaviour he has presented is, in his words, "applicable to events throughout known history".<sup>6</sup> But if it is possible to devise a criterion based on the relationship between the empirical order, not as a Realist understands it (which is what Herz admittedly is) but as both Realist and Idealist might understand it, and the ideal order also as it might be generally understood, the result might be more objective and, it is hoped, universally valid.

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thought which ... recognizes ... the implications for political life of those security and power factors which ... are inherent in human society." Likewise he says: "Political Idealism ... is characteristic of that type of political thinking which ... does not recognize the problems arising from the security and power dilemma ... ." Herz obviously has to assume the irrational nature of human society: how does he classify the thinker who, as unlikely as it may seem to Herz, sees no contradiction to be resolved between the empirical and ideal orders?

<sup>6</sup>Herz, op.cit., p. v.

To this end, a new definition would be phrased as follows:

POLITICAL IDEALISM is defined as any political theory which in its particular conception of the nature of man, politics, and society, by effect or by design resolves any seeming contradiction between existing impulses in the empirical world and the historical attainability of a rational and moral order derived from universally valid abstract principles.

A closer look at the terms of the definition of Political Idealism may facilitate the reader's efforts to apply the concept to individual thinkers. Key words or phrases which may stand in need of explication would seem to be: "existing impulses", "historical", and "rational and moral order": otherwise their interaction would not seem to merit individual attention.

It should be noted that the complete phrase is: " ... resolves any seeming contradiction between existing impulses". Again it must be stressed that it is not necessary to credit any contradiction whatsoever, for to do so would imply a certain type of preconception with regard to the empirical order. This definition avoids Herz's unnecessary restriction, although the restrictiveness involved in the latter exists only if Herz wishes to include all political thinkers. In practice, most political scientists have been willing to concede at least an apparent conflict between the empirical order and the ideal world. Thus by "existing impulses" is meant those forces which by themselves or in combination, have made the history of man read like a chronicle of the ravages

of power, exploitation, inequality, wars, and other conflicts. In short it is man's proclivity to indulge himself at monotonously regular intervals in activities associated at one time with a "state of nature" (in a Hobbesian sense), and more generally in a cynical age, accepted as part of the empirical order as it is known now or at any particular time. The drives which inform this behaviour are referred to by several names, most popularly, the will-to-live and the will-to-power, often summed up in that most eloquent of French phrases, la condition humaine. What essentially is meant by this is that the "will-to-live" and its natural corollary, the "will-to-power", when in combination, produce a tragic paradox. One man's desire to perpetuate his existence causes him to regard everything as a potential threat to that aim. To insure himself better against the effects of such threats, he seeks after power, and his safety is measured in terms of the power differential between himself and others. But if A gains power, it is by definition an automatic threat to the "will-to-live" of B and so B must make up that difference. This spurs A on again and the spiral has commenced. This quest is at the same time self-assertive and self-destructive. While various imposed primitive orders may have mitigated the circumstances under which this struggle took place, so far in history it has not been eliminated. One has only to witness the sorry tale of man's existence up to now to testify to that. In other words, this is man's egotism. Obviously the phrase "existing impulses" should not be taken to refer to any alleged "pity instinct", or if it includes



that, it should mean more properly those forces which have historically prevented man from giving full play to such an instinct, whether imposed from within or necessitated from without. Like John Herz, one may wish to commit oneself as to the exact nature of these impulses by using the term "security and power dilemma", and buttress it with illustrations taken from any Freshman Sociology text; or one may be satisfied to describe them more generally; but what is underlined here and what is universally agreed upon, is their effect. What they will be specifically depends ultimately on one's view of the nature of man, politics, and society.

The word "historical" in the sense in which it is employed in the definition, is much more than a "time back there concept". It is the total duration of man's temporal or secular existence prior to an apocalyptic denouement. Nothing can be said about what man may or may not achieve during this period, for that depends on one's view of the nature of man, but as one author has suggested, it is "the depth dimension of our present."<sup>7</sup> Which is to say that it is past, present, and future seen in terms of all of man's limitations and/or freedom. In some systems of thought, "history" is limited to that length of time man takes to achieve perfection, but it is a matter of much confusion whether the exact moment of the achievement of that perfection falls on the historical or post-historical side of the great dividing

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<sup>7</sup>Gordon Harland, The Thought of Reinhold Niebuhr, New York, 1960, p.91.

line; all of which again makes man's achievements a poor criterion. Thus, where the words "history" or "historical" appear to be used in this study in a specific sense, an eschatological criterion will be implied. It should therefore be kept in mind that what lies "outside history" remains beyond the competence of man, politics, and society no matter how they are defined. Moreover it remains beyond the competence of this thesis whose concern is with differing concepts of the 'possible' "within history".

With regard to a "rational and moral order", there is no attempt here to stipulate what values will inform the concept, how they are obtained or how they relate to that order. It suffices to state that the order is somehow derived from these ultimate values and that this makes it "moral". However, it must be remembered that this conceptual world is both moral and rational. This is necessary if only because throughout history men have been less than satisfied with the prospect that reason and obligation might sometimes conflict. As such, the use of the word "rational" includes what is commonly understood by the term (the Rationalist school's belief in the appropriateness of reason alone to all aspects of human existence), but also means more than this and may therefore require explanation. In this case, "rational" refers to the fact that the posited order has, in theory, already reconciled any conflict between the previously mentioned egotistic impulses of man and the moral requirements of that order. An easy harmony is thereby established between that which is right and that

which is reasonable.

Having established that the Political Idealist upholds the proposition "what should be, can be", all that remains is to discuss various concepts which will generally attend this attitude, or can be derived from it. While Political Idealism is literally any theory which holds to the attainability of a posited order within history, more typically it takes the form of Individualism, Humanism, Liberalism, Rationalism, Pacifism, Internationalism, and even Anarchism (included in the category of Liberalism is so-called "hard Liberalism" or Marxism, which is often a very confusing element in this category of Idealism - for while it employs Realist analysis, it does so for Idealist ends). All of these schools must try to establish a connection between the ideals they champion and the actual history of man in society,<sup>8</sup> a feat which is usually accomplished in one of several ways. One may put forward political ideals as goals of political action, to be realized in a more or less distant future through the operation of an "objective trend" or "necessary development" as discerned through a philosophy of history (Marxism). Without relying on any "inevitability", one may attempt to demonstrate that the attainment of the political ideals merely attends the fullest expression of those selfish but enlightened interests which have traditionally motivated

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<sup>8</sup>'man in society' is historical man. Thus this connection between Utopia and the history of man cannot be provided by any reference to a Golden Age in the sense of the Christo-Judaic "Garden of Eden". Man 'before the Fall' is no less outside History than is Man 'after the Day of Judgment'.

men (*laissez-faire*).<sup>9</sup> Or one may at the very least demonstrate that present and past exist in a neutral limbo, awaiting as it were, but not advancing toward, the ideal.

To do this, the Political Idealist must promote one of several ideas as to the nature of the already-mentioned "existing impulses". He may assert that the "impulses" do not exist, in which case he must devise some other explanation for the disorder that the rest of humanity appears to find in the empirical world. He may assert that the "impulses" tend toward a natural harmony. He may assert that the "impulses" are transitory and malleable, in which case he opts for "free will". (The assertion that the "impulses" are part of a grand design of objective laws is not typical of Idealism but is a determinist argument borrowed by Marxists from the Realist school and used out of context.) Thus the Idealist (excluding the Marxist) is necessarily voluntarist. Any failure so far to attain the "good order" is thereby shown to be derived from man's wickedness or stupidity or both. Thus by an act of will, "reality" is altered (in actual fact, rejected) and

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<sup>9</sup>The reference here is to what might be called "classical" *laissez-faire* which states that an invisible hand permits the individual to seek his own (true) gain and at the same time, consciously or unconsciously promote the general interest of society. As E.H. Carr points out (*op.cit.*, p.42-3), if the individual behaves badly, it is because he is short-sighted and muddle-headed. Superficially, *laissez-faire* might be seen as an easy identity of is and ought (thus its usefulness to conservatives in preserving the status-quo), when it is really one of ought and ought on different levels of social structure. As well, it should be pointed out that the Social Darwinist variant of *laissez-faire* has more in common with the previous example of Marxism than it has with *laissez-faire* as discussed in this context, especially with regard to the determinism of the former.

the way paved for an ultimate solution.

Very little time has been spent so far in dealing with the Realist position. As an approach to politics, it developed as a reaction against Political Idealism and because of this, and its generally-acknowledged "pessimistic outlook" (sometimes erroneously called 'cynicism'), it is most often described in terms of what Idealism is not. While this method may be attractive, it is not the stuff of which definitions are made, for it is the impression of the author that unlike definition which attempts to grasp the essence of something, description will involve a comparison with something else and may be implied in terms of an antithesis. Accordingly, a positive statement (definition) of the concept of Realism is as follows:

POLITICAL REALISM is defined as any political theory which postulates historic and existing impulses in the nature of man, politics, and society as fixed and immutable realities which determine the basic and enduring irrationality of historical political existence.

While the remarks preceding the above definition were addressed specifically to the concept of Political Idealism, it should require little mental effort on the part of the reader to extend them to the definition of Political Realism. Disregarding the addition of the word "historic" (in its commonly understood usage) to the phrase "existing impulses", the phrase "fixed and immutable realities" (which should be self-explanatory), and the antonym "irrationality", the phraseology is similar to that of the former definition. Nevertheless, so that the category may be completely understood, a

few general remarks will be addressed to the implications of the position. Realism recognizes the effects of a basic irrationality which is assumed to govern political life, and bases its theories and observations upon the phenomena of "existing impulses" as understood by them. Thus the Realist must emphasize the irresistible strength of these impulses in a pre-determined existence which he is powerless to change. He thinks in terms of causality in stating: "what is, must be the limit of what can be". He also regards those same values which the Idealists proclaim, as being derived from this irrational political existence; the implication of which is that ethics is a tool of politics. However any attempt to glorify the 'is' as an 'ought to be' lies beyond the capacity of the Realist qua Realist and while there is an observable tendency toward this, it is not intrinsic to the school. Generally the Realist has no difficulty in coming to the conclusion that any Idealist proposition is not 'fact' but 'aspiration', and will go on to demonstrate that far from being a priori propositions, they are completely rooted by cause and effect in the world of 'reality'.

No attempt will be made at this time to chronicle the charges that each side levels at the other, or to suggest weaknesses in each position. These may or may not be evident, but this is not important, for these implications of the opposition between Idealism and Realism will develop slowly from a more detailed study of their applicability to the political thought of Reinhold Niebuhr.

These then are the major statements of each concept. Every political theorist must at any particular point in his system opt for one school or the other, for it is not possible to embrace all the elements of both in one consistent theme. Nevertheless there are writers who for one reason or another, have attempted to incorporate in their work elements of theory which upon closer inspection are revealed to have been derived from the opposite school to which one would normally assign the writer. In Aristotle's Politics, Books I - III, VII, and VIII belong to the Idealist school while Books IV, V, and VI were more concerned with empirical investigation.<sup>10</sup> The divine history and the profane history in Augustine's City of God are outlined in parallel, but are never fused. Marx has already been mentioned in this context as what Bluhm calls a "bridgebuilder". That men such as the aforementioned should prove the exception rather than the rule, will become clearer as the features of each concept are applied to Reinhold Niebuhr. However, the fact that few writers stand in both camps to any significant degree, should not be taken to mean that most authors are unwilling to make use of opportunities for reconciling opposing theories. This often makes for confusion in analysis.

It will be recalled that mention has been made of certain requirements which must be met in order that this classification might be considered meaningful. The remainder

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<sup>10</sup>George H. Sabine, A History of Political Theory, New York, 1961, pp. 98-105.

of this chapter will be devoted to a discussion of this aspect.

The antithesis of utopia and reality, or so it might be termed, is perhaps the commonest phenomenon in all of politics. Every citizen, if he has any political consciousness at all, is at least dimly aware of the frustration caused by a comparison of what is and what might be. Nowhere is this more vividly shown than in the field of international politics which is particularly susceptible to outbursts of wishful thinking disguised as ultimate solutions. How many times has the wish been expressed that if only common, hard-working, blunt-talking folk on both sides of the Iron Curtain were to sit around the conference table instead of all those diplomats, how soon everything would be cleared up! By merely substituting nouns and adjectives in that sentence, it could serve as an all-purpose form whose blanks could be filled according to the situation, and made to apply to political problems in every century since man emerged from caves. This attitude has by no means been limited to the political masses. In his column in the Toronto Globe and Mail of Wednesday, February 16th, 1966, Richard J. Needham quotes ex-President of the United States, Harry Truman in the following manner:

"It all seems to have been in vain. Memories are short, and appetites for power and glory are insatiable. Old tyrants depart. New ones take their places. Old differences are composed, new differences arise; old allies become the foe, the recent enemy becomes the friend. It is all very baffling and trying."<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>Richard Needham, The Globe and Mail, Feb. 16, 1966, p.6



Mr. Truman here speaks with the disillusionment and cynicism, not of the Realist, but of the frustrated Idealist or as Needham calls it, the Dawnist. "Dawnism", Needham describes as, "the idea that by some wondrous method ..., you can set up a brave new world in which all are happy and healthy and harmonious, where the lion lies down with the lamb ... ." Unfortunately the columnist feels that this is characteristically American, but while it cannot be doubted that the American nation has suffered from this to a greater extent than have her more sophisticated counterparts in old Europe, it is to be seriously questioned whether it is a point of view limited solely to the New World. Marx after all was a German, Lenin was a Russian, and the League of Nations dream-world was never joined by the Americans.

All men when they think politically, long for a better order -- for all men, when they think politically, think with a purpose. Thus all political thought in its inception has an expressed desire to move from the present tense to the future tense in the form of an "if, then" sequence. It is obvious however, that any statement on what the future may hold depends entirely on one's understanding of the present, which in turn is a function of knowledge of the past. Commonly, attributing 'utopianism' to a political idea indicates one's basic disagreement with the particular view of the future that the idea advances, while attributing 'realism' indicates approbation. More than this, each is a comment on the idea's implied concept of the present and the past and

the relationship between them.

It can be argued that the present is no more knowable than the past or the future. Yet even in the absence of such knowledge, terms such as 'utopian' and 'realistic' are continually used, quite often without much meaning or content. It has been the primary task of this first chapter to ground these concepts in a theoretical base divorced from a prior commitment as to what reality is. Thus this theoretical base consists of differing concepts, not of the empirical world and the rational ideal, but of the relationship in history between the two, whatever they may be.

This then is the purpose of the distinction between Realism and Idealism -- to provide an objective and universal means of grouping all political systems, in the light of which the scheme's efficacy and fruitfulness must be judged. In other words, if all political thought asks three great questions: "what is desirable?", "what is possible?" and "how can it best be attained?", a fundamental division in terms of the answers given to any of these questions will be meaningful to academic inquiry. The selection in this instance, of the second question -- "what is possible?", should not be seen to imply that this is more important than the first: quite obviously any complete political system must answer both. It is simply that the "Realism-Idealism" dichotomy inherent in the second question but not in the first (or third, for that matter), permits an examination of all political thought with-

out prejudgment of either the metaphysical underpinnings of each system or its rationality. Moreover, it is only within recent years that the "utopian-realist" contrast has been used as a basis for analysis, although for the large part there has been no contrast involved (for years men have, as in the battle of the sexes, agreed to admit the difference but have never defined it), but simply an examination of Utopians or Realists within their respective schools.<sup>12</sup> Accordingly, this chapter may be seen as an attempt to remedy a situation in which an entire aspect of political analysis has been overlooked.

Finally, there are two very practical considerations to which this classification must answer. It would be most amusing, not to say disheartening, to go to the trouble of idealizing two basic types, only to find that nearly all political theorists belong to one and but an insignificant minority to the other, or, what is worse, that everyone falls more or less near the middle. The reader may reassure himself on this score: there are substantial numbers on both sides of the great divide and only a tiny minority have feet in both

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<sup>12</sup>Studies such as: George Kateb, Utopia and Its Enemies, New York, 1963; J.N. Shklar, After Utopia, Princeton, 1957; G. Negly and J.M. Patrick, The Quest for Utopia, New York, 1952; B.F. Skinner, Walden Two, New York, 1948; Karl Popper, The Open Society and Its Enemies, Princeton, 1950; and Barrington Moore, Political Power and Social Theory, Cambridge, 1958; concern themselves solely with one school or the other and as such are never bothered with the problem of definition. The reader is vaguely aware of the fact that both he and the respective authors may share some notion of what these groups are, and this presumably takes the place of definition. Contrast this with Herz's Political Realism and Political Idealism which constitutes the sole effort to consider both schools at the same time over the broad range of political thought.

camps. This is necessarily so, because of the antithetical character of the distinction, and it may be seriously argued that even this minority has substituted pretension for logic, or as others claim, theology for political science.

Obviously, the second question in the mind of the reader must concern the applicability of the categorization herein evolved, to the political thought of Reinhold Niebuhr. It is significant that it will be shown throughout the remainder of the thesis that he belongs to that minority which combines elements of both schools, as the title of this study would indicate. It is hoped that the great significance of his contribution to political thought in general and international relations in particular, will be underscored or even highlighted by viewing Niebuhr from the vantage point of an awareness of the differences between the Realist school and the Idealist school. Like Marx, he takes elements from both: unlike Marx, in the end he transcends both.

## CHAPTER II

### THE ROOTS OF NIEBUHR'S POLITICAL THOUGHT

Les deux sujets ont grandi concurremment dans mon esprit, l'excès de l'un trouvant dans l'excès de l'autre une permission secrète et tous deux se maintenant en equilibre.

ANDRE GIDE, Journal, page 365.

The difficulty of placing Reinhold Niebuhr in any neat category confronts his students and critics alike, at all levels of discussion. No attempt to capture the genius of the man either at a point in time or in a field of endeavour can possibly succeed, and certainly no effort to superimpose upon his life's work a rigid systematic framework will ever bear fruit. It is at once an admission of the dynamism of his thought and a testament to the diversity of his interests that Niebuhr can only be likened to Stephen Leacock's Lord Ronald who flung himself upon his horse and rode madly off in all directions.

McCall's refers to Niebuhr as America's leading Protestant theologian.<sup>1</sup> Walter Lippman and Hans Morgenthau consider him a practical political strategist and a theoretical interpreter of politics.<sup>2</sup> Nathan Scott himself calls Niebuhr

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<sup>1</sup>McCall's, John Cogley, "An Interview with Reinhold Niebuhr", February 1966, page 90.

<sup>2</sup>Nathan A. Scott, Reinhold Niebuhr, Minneapolis, 1963, p.8; see also Hans Morgenthau's article in Reinhold Niebuhr: A Prophetic Voice in Our Time, Greenwich, 1962.

a theological anthropologist.<sup>3</sup> Charles Frankel sees him as a philosopher of history.<sup>4</sup> Will Herberg describes Niebuhr as the leading spokesman of Conservatism.<sup>5</sup> C.V. Crabb regards him as the primary critic of the Realist school;<sup>6</sup> while Robert Osgood, on the other hand, calls Niebuhr a primary critic of the Idealist school.<sup>7</sup> Paul Ramsey considers him above all a moralist.<sup>8</sup> It will be noted that all these references have been culled from discussions of Niebuhr written within the last six years. If one were to take in a span of fifty years, one would see that he has also been considered at various times a pacifist, socialist, Marxist, liberal, and adherent of the Social Gospel, to mention just a few of his titles. The final word perhaps comes from William Bluhm who sees Niebuhr as "at once a theologian, metaphysician, epistemologist, moral philosopher, psychologist, and student of politics".<sup>9</sup>

All these labels relate to Niebuhr's direction of thought and/or vocation. And all are in a sense correct, yet none speaks the whole truth. Were one to take as a basis any

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<sup>3</sup>Nathan Scott, op.cit., p.9.

<sup>4</sup>Charles Frankel, The Case for Modern Man, Boston, 1962.

<sup>5</sup>Will Herberg, National Review, "Reinhold Niebuhr: Burkean Conservative", December 2, 1961, p.379.

<sup>6</sup>C.V. Crabb, American Foreign Policy in the Nuclear Age, Evanston, Ill., 1960.

<sup>7</sup>R.E. Osgood, Ideals and Self-Interest in America's Foreign Relations, Chicago, 1961, pp.381-3.

<sup>8</sup>Paul Ramsey, Nine Modern Moralists, Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1962.

<sup>9</sup>Bluhm, op.cit., p.68.

of his shifting tactical positions, the confusion would be multiplied. In the span of his life he has been violently for and against Woodrow Wilson, Franklin Roosevelt, Winston Churchill, the New Deal, American participation in the Second World War and Keynesian fiscal policy.<sup>10</sup> On these points the contradiction has been real; on a good many others it has only existed in the minds of his, at times, bewildered audience. Both John H. Yoder and Emil Brunner admit that most people consign Niebuhr to the ranks of "Neo-Orthodoxy" with all that that means, and both proceed to argue that this is a mis-nomer derived from public confusion, not as to what "Neo-Orthodoxy" stands for, but what Niebuhr says.<sup>11</sup> Unacquainted with Niebuhr's rather original use of terms such as "cynicism", "idealism", and "original sin", popular understanding of the subtleties of his argument is, on occasion, minimal. Robert C. Good understates the case if anything, when he says euphemistically: "It should be held in mind that Niebuhr is not a definitional writer."<sup>12</sup>

The background to this apparent inconsistency may be seen in the fact that Niebuhr's life neatly divides into five

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<sup>10</sup>See Arthur Schlesinger Jr., "Reinhold Niebuhr's Role in American Political Thought and Life", in Kegley and Bretall, Reinhold Niebuhr: His Religious, Social, and Political Thought, Toronto, 1956.

<sup>11</sup>J.H. Yoder, Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Pacifism, New York, 1961, p.4; and Emil Brunner's article in Kegley and Bretall, op.cit., pp.28-33.

<sup>12</sup>R.C. Good's thesis, The Contribution of Reinhold Niebuhr to the Theory of International Relations, Yale University, 1956, p.8 (microfilm).

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periods, conforming with five separate stages of the development of his political and religious thought.<sup>13</sup> The point is that the commentator is at a loss to state categorically what Niebuhr's thought is. What inspired him in 1926, he refuted in 1935, and then proceeded to synthesize in 1952. To the best of the author's knowledge, this process is continuing presently. Thus the present task of discussing Niebuhr's thought is not unlike attempting to capture the fleeting images of a kaleidoscope by engraving them on a wood-cut. The rapidity with which each succeeding impression resolves into a different yet related pattern, is matched by the painful sluggishness and immobility of the portraying medium.

Finally, it is patently obvious that Niebuhr simply will not conform to any one pre-ordained categorization based on a theoretical structure. True to his early schooling in Marxist methodology, his thought proceeds in crab-like dialectic fashion from one position to its opposite, and then combines and transcends both. As Scott observes: "It (his thought) has always been hammered out in the process of his responding to whatever presented itself as problematic in the social and political environment of his time."<sup>14</sup> Niebuhr is at once the iconoclast and the polemicist. Words such as "dialogue", "dynamic", "tension", and "possibilities" repeat themselves consistently, and show him to be ill at ease in any extreme posi-

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<sup>13</sup>ibid., p.1, (Table of Contents).

<sup>14</sup>Nathan A. Scott, op.cit., p.9.



tion for long. Some authors are tempted to suggest that Niebuhr stands in the tradition of Plato, St. Augustine and Burke -- more in their capacities as individuals -- (Bluhm is one who suggests this), but one cannot help noticing an accompanying wariness of extending these comparisons too far. If there is any consensus among Niebuhr's reviewers it must lie primarily in this fact: that here is a dynamic creative thinker not to be contained by any ready-made analogies. Admittedly he is a Christian; more specifically he is an apologist for the "genius" of the Hebraic-Christian tradition, as he calls it. Yet what has one revealed after saying this? Most of Western thought has derived its ultimate values from this source and the Christian Church has an exceedingly large roof. Billy Graham and Rudolph Bultmann have at least two things in common: both are Christians and neither cares much for Niebuhr's Christology. Thus in the end, the only label that can be applied proves too broad to be of any use.

Niebuhr himself is of little help in the search for a title to pin on him, not least because, while he is fond of using labels to spot the flaws in the arguments of his opponents, he objects to their use in his case. Many times he has stated that he is only a political scientist by "avocation". In his opening remarks to the Kegley and Bretall study, he says: "I cannot and do not claim to be a theologian. I have never been very competent in the nice points of pure theology."<sup>15</sup> Whatever

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<sup>15</sup>Kegley and Bretall, op.cit., p.3.

it is that he feels competent to do, he is not about to disclose it. Nor is he prepared to apply a political label to himself -- perhaps wisely, for while he regards himself as a 'liberal', he reserves the right to coin his own meaning for the word ... which turns out to be a hybrid combination of a Burkean conservative with a liberal conscience, although not quite.<sup>16</sup> He admits to being a Christian, although he implies a qualification when he states: "When religions claim to be absolute because they have a revelation from God, I'm as skeptical as the village atheist."<sup>17</sup> As Samuel Johnson might have said, Dr. Niebuhr is a very unclubbable man.

Notwithstanding the difficulties which have been outlined above, some justification must be offered for discussing Dr. Reinhold Niebuhr in the context which has been suggested by the title of this thesis. This justification, i.e., that Niebuhr has a particular field of endeavour which can be related to the topic under discussion; that it is indeed possible to distinguish between his mature thought and the confusing strains which led up to it; and that there exists a framework into which his thought can be fitted, -- rests on the following three assertions: 1) that Niebuhr's vocation is Applied Theology and therefore as much Political Science as anything else; 2) that what he has written since 1936 constitutes his finely-

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<sup>16</sup>McCall's, op.cit., p.166.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., p.171.

honed political thought; and 3) that Niebuhr is, for want of a better term, a Realist-Idealist. These assertions will be discussed as listed.

For Reinhold Niebuhr, theology and politics are not separate fields but merely two perspectives of a single reality. That he could hold this opinion in contradistinction to that of many of his fellow academics, would seem to indicate a difference in orientation to theology similar to that which exists in the sciences between Physics and Engineering. Far from being the cloistered systematic theologian so often produced by European divinity schools, Niebuhr has deliberately set out, as Paul Lehmann puts it, "to overcome the estrangement of the modern mind from the insights and content of the Christian faith".<sup>18</sup> Niebuhr is enough of a theologian to attempt to demonstrate the truth of the Christian faith, but at the same time, he is enough of a pragmatist to attempt to demonstrate its relevance as well. It is this admixture which justifies the term "Applied Theology". In theory, this vocation (that is, Applied Theology) should involve him in politics as much as in theology. In practice, it has.

As Robert Good notes in both his doctoral thesis and in his book, six (sic) of Niebuhr's eighteen (sic) books have dealt primarily with political problems and none has ignored the political field entirely.<sup>19</sup> The same observation applies

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<sup>18</sup>Kegley and Bretall, op.cit., p.253.

<sup>19</sup>Bibliographical details can be obtained in Robert Good's thesis, op.cit., pp.1-4, and in Robert C. Good and H.R.

to his more than 1500 articles which have produced a torrent of comment on current events. He has produced major studies in International Relations in such journals as the American Scholar, the Virginia Quarterly Review, Foreign Affairs, the Yale Review, World Politics, and International Organization. His writings for the classroom include contributions to the following volumes: Hans J. Morgenthau and Kenneth Thompson (eds.), Principles and Problems of International Politics, New York, 1952; William Ebenstein, (ed.), Man and the State: Modern Political Ideas, New York, 1957; Karl De Schweinitz and Kenneth Thompson (eds.), Man and Modern Society, New York, 1953; and Frederick H. Hartmann (ed.), Readings in International Relations, New York, 1952. He is, at the moment of writing, editor of the bi-monthly Christianity and Crisis, and has contributed frequently to the National Review, Atlantic Monthly, the Nation, the New Leader, the New Republic, and Harper's, to name just a few.

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Davis, Reinhold Niebuhr On Politics, New York, 1960 (a volume of comment and source material). Nathan A. Scott, op.cit., also provides a list of Niebuhr's accomplishments on page 8. With respect however to Good's figures of six and eighteen respectively, nowhere is it clear which six he means, and the figure eighteen obviously does not include what one must presume to be Niebuhr's final work on politics, Man's Nature and His Communities (1965). In addition to the latter, there would seem to be seven works exclusively devoted to politics as opposed to a philosophy of history or theology, to wit: Moral Man and Immoral Society (1933); Christianity and Power Politics (1940); The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness (1944); The Irony of American History (1952); Christian Realism and Political Problems (1953); Pious and Secular America (1958); and The Structure of Nations and Empires (1959). All were published in New York City.

If this were not enough to qualify him as a political scientist, there are as well, many examples of his active interest in politics. In his early years, he often ran for public office as a Socialist and has held positions of leadership in such groups as United for Democratic Action, the Liberal Party of New York, the American Association for Democratic Germany, and the Resettlement Campaign for Exiled Professionals. In the fall of 1946 he was a member of a State Department mission to Germany and was appointed in 1949 as an official representative to the fourth session of the General Conference of UNESCO. He has since frequently served as an informal consultant to members of the policy planning staff of the State Department and is at present a Research Associate at Columbia University's Institute for War and Peace Studies. It is a wonder that he has found time to be a theologian.

Every student of Niebuhr's thought, whether it be in politics, philosophy, or theology, has at one time or another had to grapple with the problem of what may properly be considered to be that 'thought'. His political writings, though extensive, have never been systematic. In a sense, he has had the annoying habit of thinking out loud for fifty years -- a practice which, although provocative and thoroughly honest, allows for the existence in published form, of ideas and opinions long-since abandoned, outgrown, and repudiated by their own author. Moreover, while he has written his magnum opus in theology (The Nature and Destiny of Man), much of his political thought lies scattered carelessly throughout his near score of

books and countless occasional articles long out of print, the implications of which have only been brought out in his last book. Were this thesis to be a treatment of the evolution of Niebuhr's thought, there would be little problem. However, since the intention is to discuss his mature philosophy of politics, it is first necessary to look for a watershed.

Anyone at all acquainted with Niebuhr's life is at least dimly aware of the fact that Niebuhr went through two very difficult periods in the evolution of his thought. In the Introduction to Robert Good's thesis already mentioned, these periods are labelled according to the prevailing philosophy Niebuhr espoused: in the first case, Idealism and its resultant disillusionment (1913-1927), and in the second, Realism (1928-1935). Thus the year 1936 is a seminal year for many reasons. That year saw the beginning of his attempts to structure a synthesis of the two violent periods he had just gone through. It was in that year that he began to be reconciled to the New Deal. It was in that year that he published his book Beyond Tragedy, in many respects itself a seminal book. 1936 was the year he began to be worried about a re-emerging Germany and the consequences of this for the United States. Thereafter, Niebuhr seemed content with the basic framework of his thought -- based not on a fixed and closed system, but on the absence of one -- and what has followed has been a series of variations on that theme. Consequently, the basis of discussion in this thesis must be understood to be Niebuhr's thought as it has been presented since 1936, although for illustration or clarification,

reference may be made from time to time to attitudes held prior to that date.

However, the contention that it is indeed possible to grasp Niebuhr's mature thought rests on even more solid ground than this. Unlike previous efforts to discuss Niebuhr's political thought, this present thesis has enjoyed a fortuitous advantage in that its composition has coincided with the appearance of what is advertised as Niebuhr's final book on politics. Man's Nature and His Communities may in fact be considered to be the nearest thing to a magnum opus on politics in this case, for it would have been possible to write this entire thesis on the basis of that work alone. Every previously woven strand in Niebuhr's political fabric is presented and refined therein; unfortunately however, the author seems after forty or so years to have grown tired of giving those detailed explanations and directions without which it is almost impossible for the reader to follow the convoluted reasoning. Thus a tacit assumption that the reader has already read his preceding works seems to pervade the book.

As previously stated, the subject matter of this study rests on three basic premises. The first two have already been dealt with in the space of one or two pages each, but the third will require considerably more detailed treatment, for obvious reasons. The question of a suitable framework or category for Niebuhr's thought is in essence, another way of phrasing the title of this thesis, and as such will constitute the remainder

of the body of this examination.

It is pointless to attempt to fathom the source of the dichotomy which informs all of Reinhold Niebuhr's thought in general, or in this case, the roots of his political thought, without first grounding the discussion in some understanding of the formative years in Niebuhr's life when this thought was developing. The disposition to encompass two conflicting streams of thought -- Realism and Idealism -- in one explanation of man, politics, and society, obviously did not arise out of a vacuum. Nor did the ability to appreciate elements in both merely reflect an acquired academic ambivalence designed to pass for objectivity. In the case of the former, the desire to find a synthesis was a legacy handed from father to son; in the latter, the attractions of Realism and Idealism were a product of Niebuhr's own contact with the world around him.

In his "Intellectual Biography" prefacing the Kegley and Bretall study, Niebuhr begins by acknowledging one of the greatest influences in his life, that of his father, Rev. Gustav Niebuhr. Unfortunately, none of Niebuhr's reviewers have devoted much time or effort to examining this particular aspect of his development to assess its effects upon his thought, and only June Bingham has described this segment of his life in any detail.<sup>20</sup> That one family could produce two of America's leading theologians -- Reinhold and his brother Helmut Richard -- would seem to denote more than coincidence, or more positively, point

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<sup>20</sup> June Bingham, Courage to Change, New York, 1961, pp.49-65.



to an environmental factor in the person of the father. One might even be tempted to argue "heredity" were that not somewhat out of style. Nevertheless, it is surprising that this factor should be so generally ignored.

Gustav Niebuhr, an amateur historian and theologian in his own right, in the words of his son Reinhold: "... introduced his sons and daughter to the thought of (Adolf) Harnack without fully sharing the liberal convictions of that theologian."<sup>21</sup> Neither was he about to forget the German conservative reactionism on the other hand, from which he had fled. Gustav saw the difficulties inherent in the total view of both attitudes and as was usual with him, embarked on an independent middle road, using as the only guide, Macaulay's epigram that 'nothing is so useless as a general maxim'. Moreover he was no ivory-tower academician. He constantly attempted to bring his thought into focus with reality by being engaged in community work and as far as the local German-immigrant farmers were concerned, "spent a good deal of time trying to beguile them from their rather unconstructive conservatism."<sup>22</sup> The image of his father continued to inspire Reinhold throughout his life for, unlike many of his contemporaries of a later age, and like his father, he sought to discover the relevance of the Faith to history; and near the end of a long career, he could look back and say, "I'm glad insofar as I have adequately exploited the

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<sup>21</sup>Kegley and Bretall, op.cit., p.3.

<sup>22</sup>June Bingham, op.cit., p.59.

vision of my father."<sup>23</sup> This vision involved discerning the point at which the Faith and history, the City of God and the City of Man impinged upon each other. The vision was a synthesis derived from the tension between the two, but it awaited a fuller exposition than the father could ever give it. This was the son's task.

If the mature thought of the elder Niebuhr gave the young man the tools with which he was ultimately to work, that is, "synthesis" and "paradox", it could not provide him with the subjects upon which he had to work. These were a function of his external environment and his response to it. Accordingly, the dichotomy (thesis and antithesis) to be resolved may be seen in the successive Idealistic and Realistic phases which marked his first forty years and which developed out of Niebuhr's contact with American society of the early Twentieth Century, in its intellectual climate and economic conditions. It is understandable that his first phase was Idealist.

Reinhold Niebuhr grew up in the America of the turn of the Century -- the America which was in the midst of an extended period of prosperity and expansion, and which, remaining aloof from foreign entanglements, was left to pursue its Manifest Destiny as it saw fit. As H.-C. Rohrbach states:

It was a proud age, filled with the conviction that democracy made men good, and that those new sciences -- psychology and sociology -- would overcome man's evil inclinations, once so dan-

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<sup>23</sup>McCall's, op.cit., p.171.

gerous, much as the machine had yoked the mountains and spanned the vastness of a continent. God remained of interest only as someone who had presumably arranged everything so well that America had come to be 'God's Country'.<sup>24</sup>

This was American liberalism -- a rising optimism about man, derived from this new mystique of democracy, from the new opportunity of those prosperous times, from a new humanism, and not least, from a romantic faith in the innocence and self-reliance of the 'chosen' country -- America. Niebuhr later (how much later and why, will become clearer afterwards) reduced this liberal climate to a set of propositions:

- a. That injustice is caused by ignorance and will yield to education and greater intelligence.
- b. That civilization is becoming gradually more moral and that it is a sin to challenge either the inevitability or the efficacy of gradualness.
- c. That the character of individuals rather than social systems and arrangements is the guarantee of justice in society.
- d. That appeals to love, justice, good-will and brotherhood are bound to be efficacious in the end. If they have not been so to date we must have more appeals to love, justice, good-will and brotherhood.
- e. That goodness makes for happiness and that increasing knowledge of this fact will overcome human selfishness and greed.
- f. That wars are stupid and can therefore only be caused by people who are more stupid than those who recognize the stupidity of war.

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While this no doubt expressed the atmosphere of American

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<sup>24</sup>H.-C. Rohrbach, "Reinhold Niebuhr", in Theologians of Our Time, Notre Dame, 1964, p.79.

<sup>25</sup>R. Niebuhr, "The Blindness of Liberalism", Radical Religion, Autumn 1936, as cited in Arthur Schlesinger's article in Kegley and Bretall, op.cit., pp.130-1.

liberalism, it by no means expressed the attitudes of its most violent adherents in Protestantism. At the same time as Niebuhr was coming under the influence of this liberalism, an effort was being made to rescue Nineteenth Century Protestantism from its individualistic and reactionary pose and restore some form of contact with the working classes. This took the form of what was called the Social Gospel.

After the First World War, Social Gospelism preached that the Kingdom of God could be realized on earth, within History as it were, through the efforts of a dedicated working class. It was conceived that the Christian ethic was directly applicable to social and political questions so that all one had to ask oneself was "What would Jesus do?" and one would have the key to unlock questions of secular policies in specific situations. Thus Christianity was not only a transcendent religion preaching ultimate judgment and repentance; properly interpreted, it was also a source of immediate answers to such varied problems as foreign policy, farm policy, fiscal policy, and wage-guidelines for workers in the turnip-waxing industry. This was the democratic idealism of American liberalism bolstered with a religious sanction. For those who felt no need of such a sanction, the ideas of John Dewey were sufficient unto themselves.

While it is not maintained that at one point Niebuhr was prepared to argue for the above-listed Social Gospel formulae, they nevertheless became of fundamental importance to Niebuhr's intellectual development. At the time these doctrines were be-

ing promulgated, he had been content in his tacit liberal assumptions, never feeling the need of questioning in his own mind the validity of such a position. However, with his appointment as minister of Bethel Evangelical Church in Detroit, and the resultant first encounter with life in a huge industrial metropolis, he soon found himself spiritually and intellectually unprepared for what lay before him. As he said himself:

In my parish duties I found that the simple idealism into which the classical faith had evaporated was as irrelevant to the crises of personal life as it was to the complex social issues of an industrial city. 26

The first blows struck against this 'simple idealism' were directed against its most vocal advocates in its most blatant form -- the Social Gospel. It was only later that Niebuhr was able to recognize the liberal underpinnings and thereby include himself in the indictment. However it was through attacking the exaggerated pose of the Social Gospel that Niebuhr finally emerged from his Idealist shell in 1927.

After an initial period of bitter disillusionment, Niebuhr proceeded to hammer out, literally on paper, the political orientation and the theological position that would succeed where his 'simple idealism' had failed. Throughout the Depression, up to 1936 in fact, he flirted with various forms of pacifism and Marxism, (substituting in effect a secular idealism for a milder religious one): and then periodically took it all back when he discovered that these palliatives could not relate

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<sup>26</sup>Kegley and Bretall, op.cit., p.6.

to the malaise of modern society. This was his Realist period which began with his first book, Does Civilization Need Religion? (1927) and ended with the publication of Beyond Tragedy (1936). In between he wrote Leaves From the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic (1929), The Contribution of Religion to Social Work, (1932), Moral Man and Immoral Society (1932), Reflections on the End of an Era (1934), and An Interpretation of Christian Ethics, (1935), all of which were published in New York.

In order to understand what was happening to Niebuhr at this time, it is necessary to realize that if he might be considered to be a child of American Nineteenth Century Liberalism on the one hand, on the other he was also a child of William James' pragmatic revolt. As Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., points out, Niebuhr is an instinctive empiricist with sharp political intuitions as well as an instinct for realism. His first reaction to any problem has always been as a pragmatist, not as a moralist: witness the fact that he was able to discover that the answer to the plight of automobile workers in his own parish, lay not in some benign optimism, but in a direct program of political and social action involving the use of the stuff of which politics is made - power. Schlesinger continues the comparison with James in the following words:

He shared with William James a vivid sense of the universe as open and unfinished ....Where James called it a 'pluralist universe', Niebuhr would call it a 'dynamic universe'; but the sense of reality as untamed, streaming, provisional, was vital for both. Similarly both revolted against the notion that this unpredictable universe could be caught and contained

in any closed philosophical system.<sup>27</sup>

Detroit had left its mark. No longer could Niebuhr rest content with the simple little moral homilies that were so obviously irrelevant to the brutal facts of industrial life; no longer could he preach a religion cut off from the realities of this world by its own closed philosophical system. What liberal Protestantism gained by its consistent world view, it lost in its distortion of the history of man, for as he said, "The universe is simply not the beautiful Greek temple pictured in the philosophy of the absolutists and the monists."<sup>28</sup> Scientific intelligence (reference to Dewey) and moral piety (reference to the Social Gospel) he stated, could not abolish social conflict; and those who would stake all on rational and moralistic methods were ignoring the limitations in human nature which must finally frustrate their efforts. In other words, the realm of love was in one place and the realm of power was somewhere else again. Like James, Niebuhr was faced with a world of antinomies; a world that simply refused to resolve itself into unity.

Thus it was that Niebuhr came to intellectual maturity under the influence both of liberal Protestantism (Idealism) and pragmatism (Realism). His first years were occupied with his battle against the former with all the weapons at the disposal of the latter. It is characteristic of Niebuhr that he

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<sup>27</sup>Ibid., p.131.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., p.132.

then decided to reverse the flow in an attempt to restate in a constructive way the relation of ethics to politics.

Without escaping the influence of either liberal Protestantism or pragmatism, Niebuhr was beginning to tire of the excesses of both. What the then contemporary Christianity (and particularly the Social Gospel) in America lacked was what might be phrased, a "sense of the relative". What pragmatism lacked was a "sense of the absolute". Yet to Niebuhr there continued to be value in each position, so neither could be completely discarded. He set about the task of salvaging what was useful in each by writing An Interpretation of Christian Ethics in 1935 -- a work which must stand as a cornerstone to his attempts to achieve a synthesis of the two streams of thought. It was that famous chapter entitled, "The Relevance of an Impossible Ethical Ideal" more than anything else that demonstrated conclusively that the period of the Realist critique was drawing to a close. More than that, however; in it were to be found the major themes that would interest Niebuhr for the rest of his life. For the first time he was a theologian; still he was a political scientist; but what was important was that he could be both at the same time. Here one also sees for the first time Niebuhr's existentialism woven out of "paradox", "original sin", and "agape", combining the Idealism of the Christian gospel to save man from pessimism and complacency, and the Realism both of pragmatism and of Niebuhr's own view of Christian faith to save man from sentimentality. It is important however, to insist upon the fact that while the concept



itself was a synthesis, it rested in its mechanics on the maintenance of a tension between Realism and Idealism. In other words he was still prepared to defend the line between pragmatism and faith -- a line designed to keep the absolute out of the relative, the relative out of the absolute, and still allow for the final judgment of a transcendental ethic. Schleinger phrases it this way:

The penetrating critic of the Social Gospel and of pragmatism, he ended up, in a sense, the powerful reinterpreter and champion of both. It was the triumph of his own remarkable analysis that it took what was valuable in each, rescued each by defining for each the limits of validity, and, in the end, gave the essential purposes of both new power and new vitality. 29

These themes were all born at various stages between the years 1913 and 1934, yet it was not until 1935 that a balance between them was contemplated. What was sketched out in An Interpretation of Christian Ethics had to be refined and developed, both in its theological and political implications, and this was undertaken in the following year in Beyond Tragedy. With this book he at last achieved what perhaps he had been searching for since his Detroit ministry -- a means of offending almost everybody in one volume. Not only did the violent adherents of liberalism and pragmatism have to bear the weight of his polemic, but in attempting the balance he preached, within the historic Hebraic-Christian faith, he also subjected traditional orthodoxy to a close scrutiny and found it wanting. In its literalization into dogma of the Bible "myths", tradi-

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<sup>29</sup>Ibid., p.149.

tional orthodoxy had created two discrete levels of being (the eternal and the temporal), and had destroyed the dialectical relationship between them. Failing to perceive that "myth" cannot speak of the trans-historical without using symbols and events in history as its forms of expression, the Literalists must invariably falsify the facts of history and do irreparable damage to any concept of history in eternity.<sup>30</sup> Niebuhr went on to support the contention that the cradle of science is surrounded by the bodies of strangled theologians (Hercules and the serpents) -- a phenomenon also attributed to Literalist obfuscation of the history - eternity relationship.

The significant fact is that Niebuhr had cleared the stage of all the actors: Marxists, secular liberals, Protestant liberals, pragmatists, pietistic fundamentalists, conservative traditionalists, and Greek naturalists in order to proceed toward his own formulation of that Christian faith which alone could maintain the dialectical tension with the secular world. In a phrase, his ultimate task has been to put Christian realism at the service of a politics of justice -- the words "Christian" and "justice" counterpoised against the words "realism" and "politics".<sup>31</sup> Prior to that task he had to discover that Christian faith. What he finally created was a theological position fully capable of supporting the whole of the Western intellec-

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<sup>30</sup>This particular phraseology is taken from his original sketch in An Interpretation of Christian Ethics, p.23 (S.C.M. 1948 edition).

<sup>31</sup>McCall's, op.cit., p.166.

tual tradition, yet flexible enough to encompass modern realities.

### CHAPTER III

#### THE NATURE OF MAN, POLITICS, AND SOCIETY

L'homme n'est qu'un roseau, le plus faible de la nature; mais c'est un roseau pensant.

PASCAL, Pensees, vi. 347.

"Man has always been his most vexing problem. How shall he think of himself?"<sup>1</sup> Thus begins Reinhold Niebuhr's summa theologica.

No doubt, in presenting the thought of this great teacher, all of Niebuhr's reviewers have had to wrestle with the problem of whether to deal with his theology (Logos) first, and then his concept of man (Nous), or whether to reverse the order. That is, insofar as it is important in discussing any thinker, to understand which attitudes are derived from which, this sequential symbolism attains a level of meaning transcending mere literary style. Is Niebuhr's God derived from Niebuhr's man, or vice-versa? It must suffice to say that Niebuhr countenances no such distinction as far as derivation is concerned. Indeed to do so would lay him open to the charge of having short-changed one or the other, and while Niebuhr prides himself on his "realism" in his concept of man, it would be difficult for him to admit that he has thereby rendered God a lit-

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<sup>1</sup>Niebuhr, The Nature and Destiny of Man, New York, 1949, vol. 1, p.1.

tle less exalted. Thus there is nothing essentially un-Niebuhr-ian in opting for either order and as such, nothing sinister is necessarily implied in the order of Chapters III and IV as it stands.

But it is important to remain aware of what is implied by the lack of implication in this question of order. This is the symbol of Niebuhr's claim. He would argue that an excessive realism which defines God and then finds man wanting (or perhaps thereby finds man wanting) is no more eminently to be desired than an excessive idealism which first defines man and thereby either derives a set of "inferior" (in Niebuhr's opinion) values, or defines man so that he may be in greater accord with values to which Niebuhr would be more agreeable.

There is no way that one can deal with this claim at this time without projecting the present study into a discussion of Niebuhr's epistemology (for the record, he has none: he just starts knowing). Whether Niebuhr's ultimate religious principles furnish the web into which is woven his dialectical approach to the nature of man and the course of history, or whether his concept of man and history necessitates his religious first principles is a matter which reasonable men may continue to debate, even if Niebuhr himself does not participate in it.

However, insofar as it bears on the presentation of this thesis, the problem of whether to deal with Logos or Nous first is resolved in favour of the latter for two reasons. In the preceding definitions of Realism and Idealism, "man, poli-

tics, and society" constituted the initial variable in the equation. And as Niebuhr himself chose to begin his greatest work with the "problem" of man, the sequence suggests itself. Accordingly, the initial discussion will concern Niebuhr's vision of historical political existence.

The importance of the question which opened this chapter is not to be gainsaid. It is clearly unrestricted in its scope for it entails an analysis of the constitution of man's humanum in all its complexity: it requires an exploration of the mysterious dimensions of that human being which composes man in his existence and his essence. It therefore follows that Niebuhr's answer to this question will contain the core of his entire thought, insofar as that answer is one aspect of an Absolute Reality, and of course will provide the controlling principle of his political "system". Thus the relevance of this answer to the categories of Realism and Idealism will be obvious, even if fitting it into one of those categories is another matter.

The problem was, in Niebuhr's own words, to find a philosophy of human nature and destiny

... which would reach farther into the heights and depths of life than the medieval synthesis; and would yet be immune to the alternate moods of pessimism and optimism, of cynicism and of sentimentality to which modern culture is now so prone. 2

To Niebuhr, the great danger which all systems have courted

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<sup>2</sup>ibid., vol.2, p.156.

has lain in the tendency to collapse the full measure of man into some simplistic formula which would overstress either man's uniqueness and dignity or his affinity with the world of nature and his misery. The result has always been a fatuous irrelevance to the real complexity of the issue, an irrelevance which demonstrated itself in the pendulum swing between illusion and disillusion. Nine out of every ten pages in any of his works are devoted to demonstrating this irrelevance, a fact which has given much of his writing a polemical turn. The tenth page has contained Niebuhr's own answer, one that has been worked and reworked countless times. While the style may change, the theme remains. It is his signature tune. As such, the difficulty is not in finding where it is expressed but where it is most eloquently expressed. One wonders whether it has ever been stated better than the way he presented it in the Gifford Lectures:

The obvious fact is that man is a child of nature, subject to its vicissitudes, compelled by its necessities, driven by its impulses, and confined within the brevity of the years which nature permits its varied organic form, allowing them some, but not too much latitude. The other less obvious fact is that man is a spirit who stands outside of nature, life, himself, his reason and the world.

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This is Niebuhr at his best -- affirming and denying in the same breath. Paul Tillich once suggested, rather charitably, that this has been due to a "predilection for paradoxical lan-

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<sup>3</sup>ibid., vol. 1, p.3.

guage"<sup>4</sup>; others have been less kind, notably Morton White who accuses Niebuhr of "voluntarily abandoning logic".<sup>5</sup> It does remain open to doubt whether this device is in fact true "paradox" even if Niebuhr himself considers it such, but it is clear that his estimate of man is dialectical. The essential character of human existence is ambiguity. Unfortunately, without a certain amount of explanation, Niebuhr's insight into man seems endowed with similar characteristics.

Niebuhrian man is basically a dual creature, that is, a creature with a dual nature. Though these two aspects may be separated analytically, embodied man forever 'combines' them and is, in fact, the result of the tension between them. As throughout all of Niebuhr's thought, tension is the operative word here -- truth for Niebuhr consists in the tension maintained between two dialectical opposites -- and any assessment of man must grasp the necessity of and express this tension. Thus any single affirmation which man makes about himself involves him in contradictions. If he wishes to stress his own unique and rational qualities, then his own greed and lust for power bear witness against him. If he asserts that men everywhere are merely the product of nature and are unable to rise above contingent circumstances, he is ignoring man the creature

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<sup>4</sup>See Paul Tillich, "Reinhold Niebuhr's Doctrine of Knowledge", Kegley and Bretall, op.cit., p.39. Dr. Tillich argues very cogently that Niebuhr confuses "paradox" and "dialectic", sometimes mistaking one for the other. Tillich does admit that both elements are present in Niebuhr's work.

<sup>5</sup>Morton White, Social Thought in America, Boston, 1959, pp.263 and 264.



who dreams of God and aspires to make himself God, not to mention the one whose sympathy with the condition of his fellows knows no bounds. If he credits man as being essentially good and attributes all evil to concrete historical and social causes, he merely begs the question -- of what are these causes the consequence? If he discovers man to be bereft of all virtue, his own capacity for reaching such a judgment refutes the terms of his judgment.

Such baffling paradoxes of human self-knowledge reveal the vexing problem of doing justice to one or the other aspects of man's duality. Only a theory inspired by a knowledge of both qualities can be considered to be adequate.

Thus throughout history Niebuhr says, human life has incorporated and will continue to incorporate a standing paradox. Relying at many points on Kierkegaard, Niebuhr begins by asserting that man is both creature and creator, made in the image of God and yet finite, caught in the necessities of nature and yet able to transcend them. Man is mortal, but can look beyond his own death; limited, but able to see beyond his limitations. Niebuhrian man constantly finds himself at an intermediary point between the world of nature and the world of spirit; and while he is a part of nature and history (note the separation of the two<sup>6</sup>), in the indeterminate scope of his freedom, he is able to stand outside the forces of nature and

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<sup>6</sup>"The freedom of the human spirit over the natural process makes history possible." Niebuhr, The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness, op.cit., p.49.

harness them to his will.<sup>7</sup> Similarly he transcends concrete historical circumstances while at the same time being a product of them. Above all, man transcends himself. Thus he is capable of making himself the object of his own knowledge, for good or ill, for insight or delusion.

Man, no matter how hard he tries, cannot entirely escape his circumstances, his parochial outlook, and his egoistic self. There will always be an element of assertive egocentrism even in his highest flights of altruism; and it is precisely when he claims that he is being most objective that man inserts something personal, self-enclosed and partisan into his thought. Man cannot hold any point of view which is not relative, nor can he have anything but a limited grasp of perfection.

And yet, despite the fact that man is the captive of such necessities, he is also free. He does know that there is a perfection beyond his grasp. He does have the capacity to see beyond his local circumstances, recognize that some other point of view is possible, and believe that there is such a

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<sup>7</sup>To give an example of the repetitiveness with which 'homo Niebuhrensis' is discussed, a random sampling of some of the source material for these statements is as follows:  
Moral Man and Immoral Society, op.cit., pp.2,3,25,29.  
The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness, op.cit., pp.6,49,53-55,154,187.  
The Irony of American History, op.cit., pp.4-7,71-77,155, 167-70.  
Christian Realism and Political Problems, op.cit., pp.5-7,39, 67 ff.,101,159,178,184.  
Pious and Secular America, op.cit., pp.127-32,135-38.  
The Structure of Nations and Empires, op.cit., pp.7,40-1, 105-07,287-90,298-99.  
Man's Nature and His Communities, op.cit., pp.30-33,82-4,106-09,116,124.

thing as impersonality and objectivity.

Again, Niebuhr phrases it best:

In the words of Pascal, the 'dignity of man and his misery' have the same source. Man stands perpetually outside and beyond every social, natural, communal, and rational cohesion. He is not bound by any of them, which makes for his creativity. He is tempted to make use of all of them for his own ends; that is the basis of his destructiveness. One may go further and declare that the limitless character of man's ideals of perfection and the inordinacy of human lusts and ambitions have their common root in the capacity of man to stand out of, and survey, any historical or natural situation which surrounds him. 8

Briefly, man is a creature living tensely between two worlds or conditions: one is the actual, limited world in which he must operate from day to day but from which he feels in some way, however slightly, alienated. The other is an ideal world which, though he sees it but through the darkness of his vision, is one for which he longs but from which he is permanently excluded. Thus it is the common and eternal fate of all men that they share the role of the disappointed idealist, for man's nature is such that he must seek after an impossible victory knowing full well that he will eventually have to adjust himself to inevitable defeat.

The consequence of this, Niebuhr claims, is that man experiences one basic and defining emotion -- anxiety -- that psychological source of all great human achievements. Anxiety shows itself in man's perennial sense of dissatisfaction and

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<sup>8</sup>Christian Realism and Political Problems, op.cit., p.6.

is a direct product of his knowledge of his own ambiguous and contradictory position at the juncture of freedom and finiteness, of spirit and nature. It is the result of man's futile efforts to escape the demands of nature on the one hand, or of the spirit on the other; yet it at the same time goads him into continuing to try to escape from finitude to infinity, to try to be God rather than to subject himself to the will of God.<sup>9</sup>

Thus is anxiety the source of man's sinfulness. It should be made perfectly clear at the outset that anxiety is not itself sin; it is merely the precondition of sin in which man attempts to make himself the basis of his own security or to escape the awful paradox of his own nature. Man thus sinks into sensuality or loses himself in fanaticism, he tries desperately to identify his own limited and relative powers with the Absolute. But while anxiety produces all this, it does not make sin logically necessary, for it must be remembered that sin is committed in freedom. And if sin is committed in freedom, it therefore follows that it cannot be attributed to a defect in man's essence. This is original sin -- that much-abused doctrine as badly understood by Christians as anybody --

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<sup>9</sup>"Man is ... anxious because he does not know the limits of his possibilities." The Nature and Destiny of Man, op.cit., p.183. Thus anxiety, like frustration, can only pertain to attainable goals. Eventually Niebuhr has to deal with the fact, as Browning observed, that man's reach exceeds his grasp, and therefore much turns on Niebuhr's use of the verb "know". This should not be taken as any criticism of Niebuhr's basic thesis, that anxiety is to be understood in its relation to freedom and sin -- a thesis which, incidentally, owes much to a similar analysis conducted in Kierkegaard's The Concept of Dread.

for sin is no more and no less than the Self's attempt to deny its own finitude, to make itself Absolute.

At the risk of causing the reader to wonder whether this thesis is becoming an exercise in theological semantics, some effort should be made to explain exactly what Niebuhr associates with the concept of sin in man. This problem is much more to the point than would appear at the first glance, for it is precisely on this basis that all of Niebuhr's liberal critics seek to attack his case. Morton White comes immediately to mind.

Niebuhr's famous statement on this matter is as follows:

... (E)vil in man is a consequence of his inevitable though not necessary unwillingness to acknowledge his dependence, to accept his finiteness, and to admit his insecurity. 10

White devotes a paragraph to pretending to explore the difference between "inevitable" and "necessary", spends another paragraph incorrectly explaining what Niebuhr means by the terms, and then sums up by accusing Niebuhr of appalling "obscurantism".<sup>11</sup> While not the most intelligent of Niebuhr's liberal critics, White's revulsion at the concept of original sin may be regarded as typical -- even if his attack is unique.

Niebuhr admits that the doctrine of original sin is somewhat absurd from the standpoint of a pure rationalism, for the concept of free will that underlies it seems absurd. Orig-

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<sup>10</sup>Nature and Destiny of Man, op.cit., vol.1, p.150.

<sup>11</sup>Morton White, op.cit., pp.261-2.

inal sin, which is by definition an "inherited" corruption, in the sense that it is inevitable, is emphatically not to be regarded as belonging to man's essential nature (in which case it would be outside the realm of his responsibility). Sin is "natural" for man in the sense that it is universal only, but not in the sense that it is necessary. Neither is sin to be regarded as a pure caprice of man's will.

It proceeds rather from a defect of the will, for which reason it is not completely deliberate; but since it is the will in which the defect is found and the will presupposes freedom, the defect cannot be attributed to a taint in man's nature. 12

What is one to say of free will? Again Niebuhr relies heavily on Kierkegaard and Pascal when he suggests that "necessity" and "contingency" are terms which belong to natural science, by whose standards the polarity of freedom and destiny in human existence constitutes logical nonsense. Man cannot be free without destiny, nor can he have destiny without freedom.<sup>13</sup> The doctrine of original sin expresses a relation be-

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<sup>12</sup>Nature and Destiny of Man, op.cit., p.242.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid. pp.243 and 263. Pascal states: "For it is beyond doubt that there is nothing which more shocks our reason than to say that the sin of the first man has rendered guilty those who, being so removed from its source, seem incapable of participating in it .... Certainly nothing offends us more rudely than this doctrine, and yet without this mystery, the most incomprehensible of all, we are incomprehensible to ourselves." Pensees, 434.

Kierkegaard's explanation of the dialectic relationship between freedom and necessity grasps the core of the issue: "If this contradiction is wrongly understood it leads to false concepts of original sin. Rightly understood it leads to a true

tween fate and freedom which cannot be fully rationalized, for it must do justice to the fact that self-love and self-centredness in existential man is inevitable, but not in such a way as to fit into the category of natural necessity.

Before concluding these remarks on the nature of man, perhaps a few ancillary statements should be directed to the implications of what has just been discussed, and in particular to the last foot-note. This brief encounter with Niebuhr's concept of sin has served several purposes. It has first of all established that Niebuhr believes man to be sinful not because of bad education, mental disease, or unjust social conditions, but because of man's reaction to his own anxiety. It has also demonstrated that Niebuhr affixes a constant to human activity in a moral dimension, beyond which existential man cannot go. Sin is inevitable and will never be exorcised. Thus there is in man as Niebuhr sees him, a certain perversity or discordance that produces disharmony in the relation of man to his community or to the Universe.

But beyond this, beyond the precise attributes that Niebuhr ascribes to man's humanum, there is a significance to

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concept, to the idea namely that every individual is itself and the race, and that the later individual is not significantly differentiated from the first man. In the possibility of anxiety freedom is lost, for it is overwhelmed by fate. Yet now it arises in reality, but with an explanation that it has become guilty." The Concept of Dread, p.105.

More than the preceding analysis of Niebuhr's concept of sin, these two quotations embody an essential aspect of Niebuhr's thought -- his case against reason when it is used as anything more than a technique (reason, in the sense of instrumental rationalism).

his position which distinguishes it from those views of man held by various other political philosophers. It lies in the "method of thought" typified by these preceding statements on the nature of sin but by no means exhausted by them. The question may be phrased this way: what role does reason play in the formation of that realm of meaning in which Niebuhr places man? It now becomes clear on the one hand that the problem of meaning, a basic problem in religious thought, transcends the ordinary rational problem of tracing the relation of things to each other in the sense that it must be determined whether or not they contradict. On the other hand, Niebuhr seems to favour employing reason as a rationalistic pattern in the form of a technique. W.J. Wolf adumbrated Niebuhrian dialectical analysis in the following manner: 1) state two opposite facts of any human problem, 2) reduce each further to negative and positive elements, 3) correlate the sub-negation of the basic affirmation with the sub-positive of the basic negation, 4) show how the Christian answer meets these complexities in the wholeness of the problem.<sup>14</sup>

It must be remembered that there are two sources of Niebuhr's insight -- experience and revelation: the former, for what it is worth, being probably led by the nose by the latter. To what extent his view is Christian or Biblical may be a matter of no small debate, but the fact remains that Niebuhr the mystic does not feel compelled to yield the right of

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<sup>14</sup>William John Wolf, "Reinhold Niebuhr's Doctrine of Man", Kegley and Bretall, op.cit., p.231.



way to Niebuhr the logician.

Formerly there can be, of course, no conflict between logic and truth. The laws of logic are reason's guard against chaos in the realm of truth. They eliminate contradictory assertions. But there is no resource in logical rules to help us understand complex phenomena, exhibiting characteristics which seem to require that they be placed into contradictory categories of reason. 15

Such are the epistemological distinctions that must be made on Niebuhr's behalf that he has given many the impression that he is an irrationalist. It is this writer's conviction that such an impression is wrong, for while Niebuhr may express reservations with regard to instrumental rationalism, it by no means follows that he makes hash of reason. While reason may not have created the paradox, it can entertain the concept without being destroyed. Niebuhr himself likes to quote Max Scheler who defined the distinction between reason and meaning as follows:

A problem of reason would be the following: 'I have a pain in my arm. Where did it come from and how may I be rid of it?' To determine that is a task of science. But I may use the pain in my arm to reflect upon the fact that the world is tainted with pain, evil and sorrow. Then I will ask: 'What is pain, evil, and sorrow essentially, making pain as such, without reference to my particular pain, possible?' 16

If, in terms of theology, the observable expression of anxiety is sin, in politics according to Niebuhr, it is the

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<sup>15</sup>Nature and Destiny of Man, op.cit., vol.1, p.262.

<sup>16</sup>Max Scheler, Die Stellung des Menschen im Kosmos, p.68 as cited in ibid., p.164.

will-to-power. Anticipating the peril in which he stands, man transmutes his natural instinct for survival (his will-to-live) into two spiritualized forms. One form is the desire to fulfill the potentialities of life and not merely to maintain its existence; for man, unlike an animal, cannot just live. He is driven to seek the realization of his true nature, whatever that is. This may be called the "will-to-self-realization", which is subject to the paradox that in order to be achieved, it must be the result of self-giving, but cannot be its intended consequence.<sup>17</sup>

The other form is the desire for power and glory. Anxiety issues in pride wherein the human ego assumes its self-sufficiency if it can only make itself secure enough; thus pride issues in the will-to-power.<sup>18</sup> The conflicts between men are thus never simple conflicts between competing survival impulses, but take on a spiritualized form and as usual, are thereby subject to another paradox -- this time, a tragic paradox. It consists in the fact that while it might be assumed that those who attain great power have thus conquered insecurity, the fact is that once embarked on its quest for security, there is no point at which the Self can feel satisfied in having enough security.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup>Man's Nature and His Communities, op.cit., pp.106-7.

<sup>18</sup>The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness, op.cit., pp. 18-22. The quintessence of pride is spiritual pride or self-righteousness. In addition to pride of power, there is also intellectual and moral pride.

<sup>19</sup>Thus Niebuhr criticizes Erich Fromm's belief that the

This of course leads Niebuhr to that great touchstone of Realist political thought, the security-and-power dilemma, about which little need be said. His usage of the concept is similar to that of Herz -- both would call it a basic irrationality but a fact in politics.

The most important aspect of this discussion should by now be obvious. Niebuhr relates the security-and-power dilemma to the will-to-power, which he relates in turn to anxiety, freedom and sin. It is clear that corrective therapy cannot eliminate it, nor can tinkering with political and social institutions, nor can better education. It is a basic part of existential man.

This then is Niebuhr's anthropology -- his doctrine of man. As Kenneth Thompson has observed, in making this the centre of his "system", Niebuhr has more in common with the traditional political philosophers than with many of his present day contemporaries. The practice of rooting political theory in political institutions and processes, rather than probing deeper to the level of human nature apparently belongs to the last few decades.<sup>20</sup> As Niebuhr's political thought is further explored, especially with regard to his criticisms of other political theories, the full implications of this central

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capacity to love is a "phenomenon of abundance" of attained security (Man's Nature and His Communities, op.cit., p.109).

<sup>20</sup>Kenneth Thompson, "The Political Philosophy of Reinhold Niebuhr", Kegley and Bretall, op.cit., p.162-3. He quotes Niebuhr as asking: "Is it possible to lead man out of the social confusion into an ordered society if we do not know man a little better than either Marxians or liberals know him?"

position will become perhaps a little clearer.

Before leaving this exposition of Niebuhr's concept of man, it may be of some interest to the reader to discover the name by which this concept goes. So far it has been called merely "Niebuhr's view of man": it will already have occurred to some readers that it might also be called "the Christian view" or "Christian Realism". This is what in fact Niebuhr does call it (alternately "the Biblical view" by which he means the Judaio-Christian heritage), but frequently it is done without any evident precise meaning. It is not even clear how he intends to employ the terms "Christian" or "Christianity".<sup>21</sup> At various times he wishes to oppose Hebraic to Graeco-Hellenistic concepts, sometimes he is referring to Protestantism as opposed to Catholicism (especially in matters relating to natural law), most of the time he has in mind a consistent faith of some sort which may be distinguished from both classical rationalism and Oriental mysticism.

Yet the question remains, is there a consistent Biblical view of any one major theological theme, and even if there is, is not Niebuhr's interpretation contradicted by many other interpretations that have just as good a claim as his own to constitute the "Biblical view"? It must be admitted that Niebuhr makes a very strong case for a consistent viewpoint, and in using it to such advantage as he does, to examine alternative systems, Niebuhr makes it appear as if no other Biblical inter-

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<sup>21</sup>This is done so frequently that references are probably needless. See Faith and History, (New York), 1949, Chaps. 7 and 8; The Nature and Destiny of Man, vol.1, Chaps. 1 and 5.

pretation could carry on an effective dialogue. However, the consistency of the Bible with regard to a particular concept of man is hardly a point of necessary debate in this thesis. Similarly, insofar as Niebuhr relies upon the effectiveness of a Biblical challenge to the shortcomings of rival philosophies, to buttress his own claim to Biblical rectitude, the argument is of little concern here. Nevertheless, it is of direct relevance to examine Niebuhr's assessment of rival concepts of man and methods of understanding man, if only to determine to what extent Niebuhr is correct in labelling his thought "Christian Realism", with the accent on "Realism".

It has already been suggested many times that Niebuhr roots his political theory in a concept of human nature, yet it has never been fully stated why. It is primarily a question of the alternative methods which are at the disposal of the political theorist. Contemporary thought has assumed that the proper method for the study of politics is that which has been so successful in the natural or physical world. It has been widely claimed that all that separated the physical and social sciences has been an unfortunate cultural lag resulting from the use of archaic and imprecise methods by backward and unsophisticated social scientists. The techniques of social science have lagged far behind those of the natural or laboratory sciences and all that theory has needed to develop has been the realization that the scientific method is directly relevant to the understanding of political phenomena.

Niebuhr's attitude to the role of the scientific method

in this area has been almost unreservedly critical. Thus he has been forced to go in search of an alternative to it. This alternative is political philosophy, and political philosophy as Niebuhr comprehends it, involves the presentation of an interpretation of the meaning of history. This being the case, at some point the political philosopher must make explicit his theory of human nature. Thus any understanding of political phenomena is inseparable from a clear picture of human nature.

This then is Niebuhr's first broadside at modern thought, and before dealing with alternative concepts to his view of human nature, it would seem logical to deal with that. His target, what has so far been referred to as the scientific method, Niebuhr calls "scientism".

Niebuhr's criticism is aimed at the social scientist's unqualified trust in the scientific method and not at its legitimate functions. He would concede for instance that in the at times vicious debate between the advocates of free enterprise and collectivism, empirical studies of reality are often the only basis for political choice to the extent that these studies limit themselves to practical questions such as the role of property in an agrarian society as compared to an industrial society.

But otherwise, the value of "scientific" studies of human behaviour is very questionable, for the scientific approach to this area of study is based on five tenuous assump-

tions:<sup>22</sup> 1) it believes that its approach is presuppositionless, whereas it is in fact impossible to give form or meaning to any social research in the absence of a framework; 2) while "science" as empiricism means humility before the facts, "science" as rationalism means the invoking of logical coherence as the test of truth, which prompts men to deny obvious facts if they appear to violate the tenets of coherence; 3) it assumes that the social observer is not involved in the reality he observes and can operate as pure mind without ideological taint, national loyalty or social and economic status affecting his judgment; 4) modern conceptions of causation and prediction ignore the complexity of causation and the intervention of contingent factors in history, including the human agent (thus the world is not a repeatable laboratory experiment); and 5) it believes that science is the profoundest, because it is the latest, fruit of culture in accordance with Auguste Comte's concept of the history of culture as the movement from a religious to a metaphysical to a scientific age.<sup>23</sup>

The dubious dogmas that inform and strengthen these illusions are two, namely, that man can be controlled as a piece of nature and that man is infinitely perfectible.<sup>24</sup> As

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<sup>22</sup>Faith and History, op.cit., p.53, and Christian Realism and Political Problems, op.cit., p.4.

<sup>23</sup>Christian Realism and Political Problems, op.cit., p.3.

<sup>24</sup>Possibly one of the better sources for a view of scientism is afforded by Holtan P. Odegard's book, Sin and Science, Antioch Press, (1956). Two quotations should suffice to present a general picture:

a pair of assertions supposedly leading to a consistent position, one might expect to find them less contradictory, for one is the essence of fatalism and the other is the essence of voluntarism. The tendency to equate history with nature and to confuse the "laws of nature" with those of politics and history has given rise to a determinism which minimizes the creative role of man. The most consistent application of this determinism is the economics of laissez faire, drawn from physiocratic theory, which warns men not to interfere with the "natural" processes and "natural" balances of history. But the tendency to equate history with nature can also inspire a contrary voluntaristic theory according to which man is called upon to use scientific technics to manage history and politics, as he has managed nature. What man can do about the peril of the hydrogen bomb is regarded as equally manageable as the physical forces which produced the bomb.<sup>25</sup>

The equation is really quite simple. As long as human reason can discern the laws which control the world of nature, and as long as there is no difference between nature and his-

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"Opposition of freedom to authority, or freedom to order is one of the fallacious attitudes men have fallen into while floundering around trying to adjust to and understand the relatively new situation of social fluidity .... If organized inquiry, the method of operative perfectible knowledge, is accepted as authoritative, there is a possibility of organically uniting freedom and authority, freedom and order, in a way attuned to the fluctuating times." (p.142)

"A theorist is a thinker who, when he finds that his problems are 'insoluble', questions the problems and tries to reformulate them so that they can be solved." (p.165)

<sup>25</sup>The Irony of American History, op.cit., pp.80-1.



tory, then human reason can ultimately manage politics and history. If modern man cannot determine whether he shall understand himself from the standpoint of the uniqueness of his reason or from the standpoint of his affinity with nature, scientism says that it does not matter, for that human reason allows him unlimited control over his position in nature. The deficiency of both liberal and Marxist theory is just this tendency to see man merely from this viewpoint of modern naturalistic rationalism.

This surely is a too simple and premature solution, but it is typical of modern man in his naive optimism. Secure in his neat certainties about himself, he has destroyed the tension between finitude and freedom in his nature, in favour of the latter. As a result, nothing stands in the way of unlimited progress in history and man can perfect himself.

Consequently, the idea that man is sinful at the very centre of his personality, that is, in his will, is thereby universally rejected. It is this rejection which has seemed to make the Christian gospel simply irrelevant to modern man, a fact which is of much more importance than any conviction about its incredibility. The idea of modern liberalism that there is progress in history, the belief in the indefinite perfectibility of man, represents the most systematic effort in all of human history to get around the fact of sin and to deny that man is a limited and finite creature. This is the very principle of sin -- the attempt to deny it -- converted

into a philosophy and it has left the modern era without an outlook that can deal with the real world. These are the children of light who "... are usually foolish because they do not know the power of self-will."<sup>26</sup> This sentimental delusion about the nature of man and history is responsible for the follies, self-deceptions, and arrogant hopes on which the modern era has at times foundered disastrously. The belief in the natural goodness and malleability of man explains why modern liberals were so late in recognizing the true nature of Fascism. The idea that evil is social in its origins and can be eliminated by social engineering explains why so many have been seduced by Communism. The concept that when man progresses in knowledge he also progresses in virtue explains why modern society has had a manic-depressive character, moving from bouts of utopian enthusiasm at one extreme to bouts of cynical disillusion and despair at the other. With such blind faith in human nature and human reason, the only word that can describe liberalism is 'benign'.

What the children of light have dispensed with in their sentimentality is that sine qua non of all politics -- power. Liberalism insists that justice can be maintained through the working of a free economic system, that a simple social harmony can be achieved by a "cool prudence and a calculating egotism" -- in short it has failed to relate the individual organically

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<sup>26</sup>The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness, op.cit., p.11.

to society.<sup>27</sup> In analyzing the relationship between nations and the international community again modern liberal culture has shown its sentimentality in its universalism and faith in the growth of law.<sup>28</sup>

In this manner, Niebuhr introduces the second touchstone of Realist political thought -- the necessity of power in social relationships. Here to Niebuhr lay the value of Marxism, for Marxism while still being part of the heritage of the children of light in terms of its illusions about the nature of history, had come to terms with power. While liberalism sought to solve the great problem of justice in society by asking people to be more kind and loving, Marxism knew that justice cannot be established without a struggle in which the interests of the victims of injustice are set against those of the beneficiaries of injustice.

But Marxism errs on two counts: in the first place, to Niebuhr, the illusion that the classless society will eliminate the problem of power is as utopian as the sentimentality of liberalism. In the second place, disproportions of power anywhere in the human community are sources of injustice. The power monopoly of a class becomes the monopoly of the party which claims to be the vanguard of the whole class: the monopoly of the party gradually becomes the monopoly of a small oligarchy, and then the dictatorship of the oligarchy further

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<sup>27</sup>Ibid., p.31.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., pp.33-41.

degenerates into the dictatorship of a single tyrant.<sup>29</sup> Thus some type of distributive balance of power must be achieved. Herein lies the third touchstone of Realist political thought -- the counterbalancing of interests to secure a reasonable justice in lieu of any more satisfactory arrangement.

These twin problems of power -- the perennial necessity of it in social relationships, and the prevention of its being accumulated by one group -- constitute the essential message of Moral Man and Immoral Society. Individuals, he argues, qua individuals, may have lofty sentiments and noble intentions; they may in personal relationships do commendable work which is a benefit to the community. But collective man -- man as he acts through classes, races, nations, parties -- is basically "immoral". The struggle among any associations of human beings is essentially a matter of power rather than morality.

It may be possible, though it is never easy, to establish just relations between individuals within a group purely by moral and rational suasion and accommodation. In inter-group relations this is practically an impossibility. The relations between groups must therefore always be predominantly political rather than ethical ... .

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<sup>29</sup>Christian Realism and Political Problems, op.cit., pp.33-42.

<sup>30</sup>Moral Man and Immoral Society, op.cit., pp.xxii - xxiii. Niebuhr would agree with Robert Osgood's statement of this problem: "A citizen's dependence upon his nation assumes a distinct intimacy because he confers upon the object of his allegiance the attributes of a person so closely identified with his own personality that he virtually acquires a second self, in whose behalf he can feel friendly, hostile, generous, selfish, confident, afraid, proud, or humiliated almost as

Furthermore, the natural egotism of such association of human beings is so great that a tolerable justice can only be achieved by guaranteeing to each group enough power to counter-balance that of other groups by which it might be exploited.<sup>31</sup>

This balance of power Niebuhr calls "managed anarchy", for when not consciously manipulated, it does not develop into a perfect equilibrium and anarchy invariably overcomes the management in the end. It is clear that Niebuhr is quite prepared to distinguish between national and international systems, for the manipulator he has in mind is the force of government.<sup>32</sup>

Since there is no power of government transcending the conflicts of nations which might be able to arbitrate the struggle from an impartial perspective, whatever order is achieved in international society stems from the imposition of preponderant power by one or more of the interested participants. When this is coupled with the fact that the group, according to Niebuhr, is more arrogant, hypocritical, self-

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poignantly as he would feel these emotions for himself in his relations with other individuals. However, the conscience of this vicarious personality, unlike the private conscience, is relieved by the sanction of patriotism, so that a citizen can manage with a sense of complete moral consistency to combine lofty altruism toward his own nation with extreme egoism toward other nations and thereby actively support a standard of ethics in foreign relations which he would not dream of tolerating in his private dealings." (Ideals and Self-Interest in America's Foreign Relations, op.cit., p.11.)

<sup>31</sup>Moral Man and Immoral Society, op.cit., pp.8 ff, 114 ff.

<sup>32</sup>The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness, op.cit., p.174.

centred and more ruthless in the pursuit of its ends than the individual, the best that can be expected of them is that they should justify their hypocrisies by a slight measure of real international achievement and attempt to do justice to wider interests than their own, while they pursue their own.<sup>33</sup>

The question then, at this point surely is, why is there no international government? Niebuhr rests his entire case on two major points: that governments are not simply created by fiat, and that governments are evidence of but do not create community. No group of individuals, he argues, has ever created either government or community out of whole cloth. Furthermore, the community, in at least inchoate form, is prior to its laws, and the authority of government is primarily the authority of the community itself.<sup>34</sup>

In this manner does Niebuhr deal with the arguments of the stupid children of light who have correctly perceived the need of bringing individual and group interests into a

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<sup>33</sup>Moral Man and Immoral Society, op.cit., p.108.

<sup>34</sup>Christian Realism and Political Problems, op.cit., pp.17-22. But there is tension in even this analysis. To cut man's achievements off at this point would be to accentuate his finiteness at the expense of his indeterminate freedom. Thus Niebuhr is required to add:

"To call attention to this fact does not mean that all striving for a higher and wider integration of the world community is vain. That task must and will engage the conscience of mankind for ages to come. But the edifice of government which we build will be sound and useful if its height is proportionate to the strength of the materials from which it is constructed." Ibid., p.29.

Even so, it will be noticed that Niebuhr has not denied that there are limits. His genius appears to consist in the fact that he consistently refuses to specify them short of saying that man cannot achieve the ultimate.

working harmony for the sake of total community by their internationalistic aspirations, but have failed to understand how difficult of hope are these realizations. Similarly he has refuted the position of those who would hold out optimistic prospects for a perfect justice in domestic society. And of course, he has done the same thing to the argument that man himself is perfectible. To Niebuhr it is significant that he has had to do this; that his battles have been with the children of light, the sentimentalists, rather than with the children of darkness, the moral cynics. Human history is the record of man's recurrent efforts to overstep the bounds which have been set upon his existence, and what happens in history is an ironic comment on this human pretension. For Niebuhr, the great events of history -- the rise and fall of social institutions, the breakdown of old social classes and the emergence of new ones, the revolutions and wars, the great hopes with which social movements begin and the great disappointments with which they end -- are neither episodes in a meaningless cycle of birth and decay (Greek naturalism), nor agents in the progressive realization of truth and goodness (modern liberalism). They are testaments in history to the judgment of the Absolute, they are witnesses to the fact that men strive for a fulfillment in history which is not there. When man fails to see that this Absolute stands irretrievably above and outside history, he commits the sin of pride and acts as though the ends he seeks in history are absolute and final. This increases his anxiety.

To many, such an outlook appears permeated with pessimism. Everywhere it seems, Niebuhr lays down limits beyond which man cannot pass and to this extent it must be stated that Niebuhr is a Realist.

But he is also a Christian realist. He has drawn a picture of man as limited and free, as aware for the most part that he lives and acts under a norm that transcends the realities with which he must deal. In order to do justice to his own tension, he must establish some relevance between that transcendent norm and historical actuality. The question of how Niebuhr relates the two, as well as the questions of the significance of all these limitations on man in practical terms, and the nature of the norm, will be the subject of the following discussion.



## CHAPTER IV

### THE ABSOLUTE AND NIEBUHR'S RATIONAL AND MORAL ORDER

Audi partem alteram.

ST. AUGUSTINE, De Duabus Animabus, XIV. 11.

The order of the terms which constitute the definitions of Political Realism and Political Idealism outlined in Chapter I would seem to require that the following discussion concern itself solely with Niebuhr's Logos (ultimate principles from which is derived his rational and moral order) per se, leaving to a concluding chapter any discussion of the relationship between that Logos and the nous described in Chapter III. That is to say, consistency with the "equation" necessitates abstracting Niebuhr's Absolute for the purposes of analysis, all the while avoiding the temptation of drifting into any discussion of that Absolute's meaning (id est, relevance). In theological terms, this involves taking apart the Trinity to discuss God the Father (the God who does not enter history) without any reference to God the Son (the God of history) or the relationship between the two. Or perhaps more significantly, it is the Civitas Dei as opposed to the Civitas Terrana, to put it in Augustinian terms.

It may seem somewhat risible, not to say pointless, to enclose this aspect of Niebuhr's thought in one ludicrously short chapter. The explanation is that while Niebuhr devotes virtually no time and no effort to describing the nature of his Absolute and its ideal society in isolation, (preferring rather to discuss it in relation to the temporal world), and consequently leaves one with little to say that is not St. Augustine's Kingdom of Heaven warmed over, it is important that this thesis distinguish markedly the two variables in the Realist-Idealist definitions, especially in applying them to Niebuhr who, it must be remembered, attempts to transcend both. Accordingly, to avoid confusion, this chapter will deal exclusively with a brief summary of Niebuhr's rational and moral order.<sup>1</sup>

Niebuhr describes his Heavenly City in the following manner:

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<sup>1</sup>It must be admitted before proceeding any further, that this particular device of abstracting Niebuhr's moral order to avoid reference to the temporal order, is most definitely un-Niebuhrian, if not anti-Niebuhrian. It is with good reason that Niebuhr fails to discuss this realm in isolation, for, save for the purpose of exposition, the Kingdom of Heaven is not to be seen or explored as if it were a segregated other-worldly dimension of Being. The kingdom which is not of this world is yet in this world, through man and in man, who is in this world and yet not altogether of this world. True to the Augustinian roots of his thought, Niebuhr consistently refuses to make what he considers to be the mistake of classical (Greek) thought which tended to a radical dualism in its treatment of the temporal and "divine" orders.

A good treatment of Niebuhr's attitude may be found in Chapter XIV of Beyond Tragedy, New York, 1937, pp.273--86, entitled "The Kingdom Not of This World". Whereas the reader might be led to expect a discussion of Niebuhr's ideal order, he is treated to a dissertation on how that order is relevant to history.

The Kingdom of God, the kingdom of truth, is not of this world .... Its servants do not fight. They do not set power against power.... The truth is ... a revelation of the fundamental pattern of life which sin has obscured and which Christ restores. The Logos is the very pattern of the world .... The kingdom of truth is consequently not a kingdom of some other world. It is the picture of what this world ought to be .... In every moment of existence those 'who are of the truth' hear Christ's voice, warning, admonishing, guiding them in their actions .... The vision of God reveals their true centre and source of existence. 2

Two basic assertions emerge from this series of statements. In the first place it is clear that in this rational and moral order, "power" in its political sense, has no place. The implications of this are mammoth. Niebuhr has just disposed of the security-and-power dilemma, the will-to-power, the will-to-live, and, in doing so, by definition has also eliminated sin and its root, anxiety.

The initial question one supposes is, how is anxiety eliminated? It will be recalled that man experiences anxiety when, in consequence of his realization of his own finitude, he attempts to make himself his own end, to translate his finite existence into a more permanent and absolute form of existence -- in short, to make himself God. Thus it must be assumed that if anxiety is to be eliminated, man must come to terms with his own finitude and seek to ground his existence in the Eternal and Absolute Reality. Niebuhr would call this a transformation into the will-to-self-realization.

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<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

Of what nature then is man that he finds his own self too small to encompass the self? Surely his dimensions exceed the limitations of the self -- in other words, man is self-transcendent in his nature.

(This) ... describes the actual situation of the self, which destroys itself by seeking itself too immediately. The true self dies if the contingent self tries too desperately to live. 3

Logically, the next question is, how does man transcend himself? Niebuhr's answer is, through agape -- that sacrificial, heedless, and universal love which makes no concessions to any self-regarding impulses and denies any and every form of self-assertion, even those "natural" prudent defences of the self which are required through the will-to-live by the egoism of others. And man cannot even consciously aim to transcend himself, for that too is self-assertive.

For the kind of self-giving which has self-realization as its result must not have self-realization as its conscious end: otherwise the self by calculating its enlargement will not escape from itself completely enough to be enlarged. 4

This involves Niebuhr in yet another paradox. If love is the means to self-realization yet cannot be used as such; if love is the norm yet cannot be regarded as an obligation or duty without defeating itself -- in what way can one speak of

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<sup>3</sup>Faith and History, op.cit., p.174.

<sup>4</sup>Christian Realism and Political Problems, op.cit., p.141.

love as being related to man in Niebuhr's rational and moral order? What is the relationship between duty and inclination, or between love as commandment and the spontaneity of the grace to love? The answer is that agape must be seen in the form of both "love as law" and "love beyond the limits of law".

Now love implies an uncoerced giving of the self to the object of its devotion. It is thus a fulfillment of the law; for in perfect love all law is transcended and what is and what ought to be are one.

To command love is a paradox; for love cannot be commanded or demanded. To love God with all our hearts and all our souls and all our minds means that every cleavage in human existence is overcome. But the fact that such an attitude is commanded proves that the cleavage is not overcome; the command comes from one side of reality to the other, from essence to existence.

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This leads directly to the second of the two basic assertions contained in that description of the Heavenly City -- an assertion that lies at the core of Niebuhr's theistic existentialism and permits Niebuhr ultimately to transcend the categories of Realism and Idealism. The Logos and all that is implied thereby constitute that of which the Earthly City is the existential form. The man of the Heavenly City is essential man.

Niebuhr describes essential man in the following manner:

The essential nature of man contains two elements; and there are correspondingly two elements in the

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<sup>5</sup>An Interpretation of Christian Ethics, op.cit., pp.209-10. For a fuller discussion, see also Christian Realism and Political Problems, op.cit., Chapter X.

original perfection of man. To the essential nature of man belong, on the one hand, all his natural endowments, and determinations, his physical and social impulses, his sexual and racial differentiations, in short his character as a creature imbedded in the natural order. On the other hand, his essential nature also includes the freedom of his spirit, his transcendence over natural process and finally his self-transcendence. <sup>6</sup>

In thus describing the essential nature of man as finite freedom, Niebuhr necessarily resists any attempt to discuss man's essential nature in definite terms as if it were a fixed and static possession. This is in fact what he objects to most strongly in naturalism, rationalism, romanticism, and all concepts of natural law; the tendency to make reference to a fixed and given human nature. Man is largely what he becomes; he is not ready-made at the outset. There are no fixed structures of nature or reason or history which man does not transcend by virtue of his spiritual freedom. Thus man stands before possibilities for action which are not calculated in terms of the potentialities of a fixed essential nature of any sort.

This does not mean that man in his essential form has become perfect in the sense of having lost his finitude. But he is to be distinguished from sinful existential man. It will be recalled that anxiety, not finitude is the root of sin, and it is this anxiety which prompts existential man to differ in the following manner: (a) man as sinner is not unmindful of the ultimate requirements of his nature as free spirit. He

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<sup>6</sup>The Nature and Destiny of Man, op.cit., vol. 1, p.270.

knows that any particular historical concretion of law is not enough; (b) he is not fully conscious of the nature of these ultimate requirements; and (c) he is not ready to meet these requirements once they are defined.<sup>7</sup>

In this manner does Niebuhr relate agape to essential man. Anything less rigorous must fail to captivate and fulfill the special dimension of freedom in man's essential nature. Love contains no code or fixed form to be imposed upon human freedom but man's transcendent freedom is "in order to love", and love is ordained as the law for his life in freedom. Love belongs therefore to the nature of essential man. From thus defining the essence of man, Niebuhr has at once defined the natural norm for essential man.

The law of love is the final law for man in his condition of finiteness and freedom because man in his freedom is unable to make himself in his finiteness his own end. The self is too great to be contained within itself in its smallness. 8

Thus existential man is not the source of the norm for his essence, nor are the fixed structures of history. What this is, is a love absolutism which expresses itself in terms of a universalism set against all narrower forms of human sympathy. It must always provide a perspective from which all lesser norms pertaining to essential man can be viewed. Not only is it alone capable of relevance to man's finite freedom,

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<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p.288.

<sup>8</sup>Faith and History, op.cit., p.174.

but through this love of God and man, men are all perfectly related to each other, for all men are related in terms of perfect obedience and love to the centre and source of their existence.

The pieces now begin to fall into place. If, as Niebuhr often suggests, moral life is at all possible only in a meaningful existence, Niebuhr must take steps to make it meaningful. So far he has related the sacrificial ethic of the rational and moral order to the essential man of the same order. It remains to be seen how he relates this now to existential man in history, both in terms of his individual life and his collective engagements. This will involve maintaining some type of tension between the empirical world and the rational ideal.



## CHAPTER V

### THE DIALECTICS OF AN EXISTENTIAL SYNTHESIS

The self is the conscious synthesis of the limited and the unlimited which is related to itself and the task of which is to become a self, a task which can be realized only in relation to God. To become a self means to become concrete. But to become concrete means to be neither limited nor unlimited, for that which must become concrete is a synthesis. Therefore development consists in this: that in the eternalization of the self one escapes the self endlessly and in the temporalization of the self one endlessly returns to the self.

SOREN KIERKEGAARD, Die Krankheit zum Tode, p.27.

Political Realism and Political Idealism, it will be recalled, are terms whose applicability to any political system depends on the relationship in history established between the empirical world and a rational and moral order. Both Realist and Idealist must at some point make three separate statements concerning 1) the nature of man, politics, and society; 2) the nature of the Absolute and its attendant ultimate values; and 3) the degree to which the former can approach in history any conceptual order derived from the latter. The definitive criterion is thus whether or not any political theory states or implies that there can be progress in history toward a concrete embodiment of an ideal world however constructed, and that at some point in time, the ideal will be, in the vernacular, "ac-

tualized". The Idealist says yes, whatever we wish is possible; the world is slowly progressing. The Realist says no, what already exists must be the limit of the possible; the world has not changed since Adam and will not change, save for the interminable redistribution of power in which empires wax and wane and tyranny alternates with anarchy. This is clearly what is meant here by the words "relationship in history", and as such, it is a straightforward and concise proposition. As a conceptual scheme it should be relevant to all political philosophies and in fact, is. With regard to Niebuhr its relevance is assured, for Niebuhr is quite explicit in his verdict on man's chances for achieving the ideal order in history: just as explicit as he is in his verdict on the assertion that nothing more is possible for man in history. But just because it may be relevant to Niebuhr's case, does not say that it can contain him.

In the first place it will soon be demonstrated that Niebuhr is a "bridge-builder", in the sense that the term was made to have previously,<sup>1</sup> for if the posited distinction (Realism and Idealism) between political systems assumes that the relationship between the ideal and the actual is summed up in the question "what is possible?", it is conceivable that one could avoid stating either that the ultimate is possible or that nothing more is possible. In the second place, it will be demonstrated that the definitions of Political Realism

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<sup>1</sup>See above, Chapter I, p.17.

and Political Idealism as constructed in this thesis, for reasons to be outlined now, do not exclude other possibilities; and then it will be shown that Niebuhr ultimately transcends both categories.

Insofar as the Realist-Idealist dichotomy does not exclude other possibilities, the key words are "relationship in history". As already stated, the definitions refer to the possibilities of a concrete embodiment in history of the rational and moral order. But here a difficulty arises -- one which questions exactly what is meant by the phrase "relationship in history", when interpreted literally. Is another interpretation of the phrase possible? Can it be demonstrated that the ideal order and the empirical world of history are related in yet another way? Surely, to consider the relationship solely in terms of the possibilities of decreasing the dialectical tension between the two realms, to limit oneself to speculation on the likelihood of a merging, is only half the picture. Thus, if Niebuhr can relate the two orders in yet another way, he will have effectively transcended the categories that this thesis has laboured to build. But before probing why he is neither Realist nor Idealist but something else again, it will be shown in what way he is both, in terms of the possibilities he holds out for man's ability to proximate an ideal order in temporal history.

Niebuhr's response to the "anything is possible" thesis of the Idealist school and to the "nothing is possible" antithesis of the Realist school, is complex, not simple. It con-

sists of a moving dialectic rather than a series of fixed propositions. To maintain the proper balance between the two, demands constant attention. Niebuhr sees man in part free and in part bound by necessity -- to overstress man's freedom leads to benign optimism; to overstress his finiteness leads to destructive pessimism. Each perspective must balance the other. Yet to cut through all this to the heart of the matter, reveals some very elegant fence-sitting.

There is no possible doubt that Niebuhr places limitations on man's progress. One could cite passages from every book and article that he has ever written to document this statement; typical are the following:

The contradiction (between the ideal and the temporal) is recognized as a permanent element in man's historic situation. 2

One of the really ludicrous aspects of modern culture, particularly in America, is that the idea of the perfectibility of man is so universally accepted (Americans being the only unreconstructed heirs of the French Enlightenment) ... . 3

... (T)here is no point in history, whatever the cumulations of wisdom and power, in which the finiteness of man is overcome so that he could complete his own life, or in which history as such does not retain the ambiguity of being rooted in nature-necessity on the one hand while pointing towards transcendent, 'eternal' and trans-historical ends on the other hand.... Only gradually is it realized that man's efforts to deny and to escape his finiteness in imperial ambitions and power add an element of corruption to the fabric of history and that

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<sup>2</sup>Faith and History, op.cit., p.197.

<sup>3</sup>Pious and Secular America, op.cit., p.129.

this corruption becomes a basic characteristic of history and a perennial problem from the standpoint of the fulfillment of human history and destiny.<sup>4</sup>

But what does all this really mean in terms of its practical effects? One is constantly moved, in reading Reinhold Niebuhr, to question the character and scope of the limits that he thinks restricts man in the attainment of the ideal in history. Niebuhr seems content however, as in the above quotations, merely to assert that the limits do exist, based on the Biblical insight or revelation of his view of man. He may describe them as self-assertiveness, but he is adamant in his refusal to specify them in concrete terms, for to claim to know the exact limits of human perfection other than that the Absolute is not possible, is to claim Divine knowledge. Perhaps one might agree with Niebuhr that if it is prideful to abolish all limits, it must surely be no less so to claim to know them or seek to define them. Thus Niebuhr criticizes all natural law theories for portraying man as a being with a fixed and structured nature, and for compromising too readily with historical phenomena which man may increasingly master.<sup>5</sup>

Thus Niebuhr can provide for a society which is open to change. He asserts that progress is always possible:

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<sup>4</sup>The Nature and Destiny of Man, op.cit., vol.II, p.4.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., vol. I, p.178, 281; vol. II, p.48,55,281.  
Also Christian Realism and Political Problems, op.cit., pp.3, 200-01; An Interpretation of Christian Ethics, op.cit., pp.41-6.

It must be agreed that history means growth, however much the pattern of growth may be obscured by the rise and fall of civilizations.<sup>6</sup>

Human freedom is undoubtedly capable of historical growth. Civilized man enjoys a degree of freedom which primitive man did not have. In the same way the mature man has greater freedom over nature than does the child. This growth of freedom imparts a forward movement to human history. 7

The community must constantly re-examine the presuppositions upon which it orders its life, because no age can fully anticipate or predict the legitimate and creative vitalities which may arise in subsequent ages. 8

His assessment of the crisis of modern times brings out this qualified optimism perhaps even better. This is, he says, an "age between the ages", when "one age is dead and the other is powerless to be born." The age of absolute national sovereignty is over; but the age of international order under political instruments, powerful enough to regulate the relations of nations and to compose their competing desires, is not yet born. For,

... we do not know how soon and to what degree mankind will succeed in establishing a tolerable world order. Very possibly we will hover for some centuries between success and failure ... <sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>The Nature and Destiny of Man, op.cit., vol.II, p.315.

<sup>7</sup>The Structure of Nations and Empires, op.cit., p.288.

<sup>8</sup>The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness, op.cit., p.83.

<sup>9</sup>Discerning the Signs of the Times, New York, 1946, pp.40-1, 54.

In this manner, Niebuhr has his cake and eats it too. He can speak of "perennial necessities" and "constant factors" in politics and still consider himself an historical relativist. He can criticize utopian schemes which only lead to frustration and disappointment, and still avoid being an obscurantist or a reactionary. He can support liberal causes without basing that support on some mild illusion as to the virtue of the reform or the effects of its implementation. The significance is that while Niebuhr can deny, on the basis of his assessment of man's nature, that man can ever be perfect, or that progress is limitless, he has succeeded in making those limitations meaningless in political terms. Just in the nick of time, the much-abused liberal creed (or at least a significant piece of it) has been snatched back from the brink of the abyss.

Yet surely the question can be asked at this point: "progress" toward what? Does Niebuhr mean to say that there may be indeterminate progress on earth toward his ideal realm -- the Heavenly City -- wherein all men are perfectly related to each other in divine sacrificial love? Absolutely not. The fact is that not only does Niebuhr hedge his bets with regard to man's limitations in order to make them meaningless from the point of view of preventing progress, he does the same thing with his "best state" and its derived values.

The ideal world of the Heavenly City, characterized as it is by agape is not the immediate goal toward which society is progressing. It is regarded by Niebuhr as a "final and

absolute possibility", which is tantamount to saying that it will never have a social embodiment. This is not to say that there is therefore no relationship between the two, but it is not a question of a direct relationship under the terms of the definitions.

It is therefore idle to assume that human society could ever be completely knit together by the perfection of love in which each carries the burdens of all, and the anxieties of each are quieted by the solicitude of all. That is the vision of the Kingdom of God, of the Kingdom of perfect love, which hovers as a possibility and yet impossibility over all human life. Actually the perfect accord between each man and his neighbour is constantly violated by the inordinate concern of each for his own welfare.

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The directly relevant norm, in other words, for political decision and social policy is not love but justice, not the uncoerced self-oblation of the Kingdom of God but the kind of mutuality that envisages a contrived balance between the claims and counterclaims of contending social interests. Thus the "best state" toward which the temporal order is making progress is that to which that order is directly relevant -- an ideal state characterized by justice, rather than by agape.

Once again the observer is awash in a sea of dialectics. However, the key to understanding the matter rests in an adequate grounding in the relationship between agape and justice.

In the first place, agape by definition, is an Absolute. Niebuhr bases all his morally normative thought on this con-

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<sup>10</sup>Discerning the Signs of the Times, op.cit., p.186.



cept. In the second place, he cannot define justice simply because it has no basis independent of agape (more will be said on this later). Justice is not a definable concept in itself, for it is a relational term with Niebuhr. In the third place, contrary to the opinions of his reviewers,<sup>11</sup> he does not even have a clearly articulated concept of justice in substantive terms. His friend and colleague, Emil Brunner, has said:

Brilliant as Reinhold Niebuhr is in his analysis of existing social conditions or of historical movements and cultural trends, this critical analysis seldom gives rise to definite, concrete ethical postulates for social action. We who ... often marveled at the brilliance of his analyses, nevertheless noted time and again this deficiency between criticism and construction. And the reason for this is evident: the lack of an adequate concept of justice .... Anyone ... who in the name of justice offers a critique of social issues or of political policy is thereby under obligation not only to state what he means by 'justice' but also what concrete choices are demanded in the name of this 'justice' he is talking about. 12

This means, in effect, that Niebuhr has to fall back on Aristotle -- everyone has to have his due. But this merely describes the spirit of justice, for the formula contains no indication of what each man's due is. This is probably what Niebuhr admitted when he stated: "Rules of justice do not follow in a 'necessary manner' from some basic proposition of

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<sup>11</sup>Gordon Harland has attempted to defend Niebuhr in this regard: the rest discuss Niebuhr's concept of justice as if this problem did not exist.

<sup>12</sup>Emil Brunner, "Some Remarks on Reinhold Niebuhr's Work as a Christian Thinker", Kegley and Bretall, op.cit., pp.30-1.

justice."<sup>13</sup>, even though he was wielding the argument against Aquinas.

What then can Niebuhr say about justice? He approaches this two ways. First, he compares it to agape. Then he breaks it down into its constituent principles, freedom and equality, between which a tension must be maintained.

Agape and justice cannot be simply identified, for agape is transcendent, heedless, and sacrificial. Justice is historical, discriminating, and concerned with balancing interests and claims.<sup>14</sup> But justice is never something apart from, or independent of, love: they exist in a dialectical relationship. Love (agape) is both the fulfillment and negation of justice. Love requires justice in the sense that to be unconcerned for the achievement of a more equal justice is to deny the claims of love. But love negates justice for love transcends the calculation of more and less and does not reward according to deserts. And finally, love fulfills justice for it provides justice with a rationale. Justice without love is merely a balance of power which cannot satisfy the special needs of "others" if those needs go beyond the general rules of equity.

Similarly, when Niebuhr attacks justice through the back door, one finds nothing but a web of relationships. One

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<sup>13</sup>Faith and History, op.cit., p.193.

<sup>14</sup>Niebuhr discusses this relationship in many places, but possibly the best source is The Nature and Destiny of Man, op.cit., pp.244-69.

arrives at each man's due (and presumably each nation's due), through the regulative principles of freedom and equality. Neither of these can be held as absolute; each threatens the other and the relation between them is always dialectical. Absolute freedom permits the will of the stronger to prevail, threatening equality. Absolute equality can be achieved only by the imposition of force, threatening freedom.

Two facts emerge from this, after all is said and done. The first is that Niebuhr only knows of justice theoretically, in terms of its relationship to three absolutes. The second is that Niebuhr's ideal state characterized by agape, must also by definition be characterized by justice to the extent and only to the extent that agape requires justice (which is to say that the Heavenly City enjoys perfect justice but also more than that).

The implications are clear. The ambiguity of Niebuhr's concept of justice is such that one could scarcely predict on purely a priori grounds whether or not it is capable of attainment. All that is known about it is that it hangs tensely between two poles, approaching first one and then the other; all the while bearing an unspecified dialectical relationship to a third pole (agape).

This has led one author to observe:

Thus Niebuhr gives justice no substantive content whatever: justice resides purely in those procedures which provide men with the opportunity to unseat those in power. What is left completely open in Niebuhr's scheme, what has traditionally been left open in American political thought, is precisely the content, mean-

ing, and significance of human freedom. Since the moral ends of the state remain undefined, we get no positive case for some absolutely best regime -- but we do get an exaltation of democratic constitutionalism. 15

This then is the case for the assertion that Niebuhr not only equivocates in his limitations of man's march forward, but he also equivocates when it comes to describing that aspect of the ideal order which man is marching forward to. In other words, Niebuhr is saying that perfection in terms of the ultimate ideal (society structured around agape) cannot be attained, but what is immediately relevant to man is a norm which exists in dynamic relation to the ultimate (society structured around justice derived from and fulfilled by agape); besides which, no one has any real notion of what this immediately relevant norm consists.

If the acid test of a Realist or an Idealist as defined in this thesis lies in the proximity of the answer to the question "what is possible", to one of two extremes (anything and

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<sup>15</sup>H.S. Kariel, In Search of Authority, New York, 1964, p.191.

Robert C. Good, both in his thesis (op.cit., pp. 313-14) and in his article in the Journal of Politics, "The National Interest and Political Realism", vol.22, 1960, pp.597-619, has valiantly attempted to defend Niebuhr here. Taking such statements of Niebuhr's as: "The problem of justice is finally more important than the problem of order, but not immediately so. The instruments of justice can function only within a framework of order", Good proceeds to argue that the goal of justice in a society is always held in tension with the goal of order. The results are disastrous. Not only would this mean that Niebuhr associates something with justice that is inimical to order (such as "anarchy", or "freedom" unbalanced by "equality"), but it would mean that Niebuhr's "best state" is in fact a "second-best state" where insurrection is likely if it pursues a policy of equal justice too strongly.

nothing), then Niebuhr must be seen as a "bridgebuilder". He has thus contrived to remain poised between an irresponsible cynicism and an equally irresponsible utopianism, for while escaping both extremes in their characteristic illusions, he has been able to distil from each the richness of their insights into the nature of man and history. However it should not be thought that this has been done without cost. The price of his Idealism is such that it has robbed his Realist limitations of much of their content: the price of his Realism is such that his ethical thought attempts to hide its nudity in a shroud of Kantian formalism. An abstract justice bolstered by a transcendental agape may offer a vision of higher possibilities, but it hardly provides a workable yardstick of ethical discrimination.

If it is assumed as has been the case throughout this thesis, that the only way the ideal and empirical orders can be related in history is in terms of the extent to which the latter can realize the goals of the former, then the discussion is ended. But Niebuhr sees yet another way in which they are related in history.

This relationship is a dialectical one of meaning. The Christian faith affirms that the same Christ who discloses the sovereignty of God over history is also the perfect norm of human nature. He is the second Adam as well as the Son of God -- existence and essence. As the incarnate revelation of the paradoxical relationship between Divine justice and mercy, He discloses the ultimate mystery of the relation of the Divine

to history. This revelation clarifies the meaning of history; for the judgment of God preserves the distinction of good and evil in history, and the mercy of God finally overcomes the sinful corruption in which man is involved on every level of moral achievement. The Kingdom of God and the Earthly City are related as essence to existence through Christ in history. To the Greeks, the Christ is foolishness because he represents a disclosure of the eternal in history. But to declare as Niebuhr does, that a disclosure of the eternal will and purpose is both possible and necessary, is to accept the paradox of man and history in its quintessence. It is to understand that man is, even in the highest reaches of his transcendent freedom, too finite to comprehend the eternal by his own resources. But it is also understood that man is, even in the deepest involvement of finitude and nature, too free of nature to be blind to the possibilities of a disclosure of the Eternal which transcends him. The love which is embodied in the Crucifixion is the golden cord which establishes an ultimate relationship in mystery and meaning between history and the Absolute. Niebuhr has gone beyond the terms of this thesis.

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